

Matthew G. Rivett

THE TORSTIEN DISPATCH

NOVA BYZANTIUM

CHRONOPHAGE

THE TORSTEIN DISPATCH

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[TD] SUMMARY

In the year 1917, Lt Rowan Guthrie, a British war hero, was killed on deployment in the Italian Alps. His body is exhumed a thousand years later by the Æsiri, a neo-Polynesian race with a curious devotion to Norse paganism and necromancy. The dogma of their ancient holy book, The Edda has come to pass. The Earth is locked in a struggle against the forces of a new ice age called Fimbulwinter, while the epic battle of Ragnarok looms. Rowan is recruited to lead a fallen legion of mythic Einherjar to the rusted wastes of Asgard, formerly known as Mars. From Valhalla, Rowan and the Ny Æsiri undead will face the elusive Vanir in a battle for the future of civilization. Or so Rowan is led to believe...

[TD] REJECTIONS

Thanks for sending this. I appreciate Matthew's influences and his ambition with this, I'm afraid it's just a bit too far out for the kind of SF I'd be able to publish effectively here, so am going to pass though would assume you'll get a strong response from a more core SF house... Best of luck with it and as always, really appreciate it.

-Thomas Dunne Books

Thanks very much for submitting this to us at Angry Robot. Always a pleasure. We'll pass on Matthew's novel. In general terms, its air of Baen-style hero-of-the-galaxy adventure is quite different to Angry Robot's approach. I suspect another publisher will be all over this.

-Angry Robot

Sorry you've had to chase on this, and I'm also sorry to say that it's not going to be one for us. The writing, for me, just didn't seem to have the elusive spark.

-Orbit

I've had a look, and I'm sorry but The Torstein Dispatch isn't for me. I hope you understand and wish Matthew the best

-Pyr

Thank you so much for sending me this. I'm very sorry for the long delay in responding. I really don't know where the last few months went! I finally got a chance to read this over the weekend, and while it certainly has some unique elements, unfortunately the overall story did not grab me as much as I was hoping it would. I think perhaps Norse mythology is just not quite my thing, ultimately. Of course, editorial tastes vary, and I wish you the best in finding the right home for this.

-Eos

A thousand apologies for the excessive delay (since I've switched my daughter into a new daycare, I am only just getting back some of my commuting reading time!), but I finally had a chance to read this week, and I'm sorry to say it is a pass. The idea was in interesting one, but in the current market, I really have to adore something to take it on. And I am sorry to say, I just didn't love this quite enough. But I do thank you for the look, apologize again for the delay, and wish you and the author all the best of luck

with it elsewhere! And please continue to keep me in mind for future submissions. I promise to get to them faster!

-Bantam

I finally got some time to really take a good look at THE TORSTEIN DISPATCH. Rivett is a hell of a writer and possess some wonderfully unique concepts and creation, but his greatest asset is also his biggest fault. I found the novel to be a bit too difficult for a mass audience and that is now my biggest area of focus here at Tor, finding the mainstream crossovers of the genre (or the rabidly fanatical ones). This may resonate with a deeper SF editor, one that revels in the complexities and genre mash-ups that Rivett has created. Thanks so much for your patience and the look.

-Tor

My apologies once again for taking some time to read THE TORSTEIN DISPATCH. Unfortunately, I don't have good news for you: I'm sorry to report that I must decline this book. The premise of THE TORSTEIN DISPATCH is intriguing and unusual. However, I do not believe that this premise was well-served by the prose, which was often stilted enough that it interfered with the storytelling. On a line by line basis, the writing failed to engage me, often because it was often quite simply unclear. The sometimes-florid prose was more attuned to the music of the words and phrases than their meaning and narrative function, and lacked the practiced storyteller's confidence and control. Ultimately, execution is more important than concept, and I'm afraid that the writing just wasn't strong enough here. I'm very sorry I couldn't bring you better news. The best of luck to you and Mr. Rivett with this project.

-Del Rey

[TD] PROLOGUE

The mists parted to reveal the icefall's sharpened seracs. Unseen, Val Rendena lay somewhere thousands of feet below. There was a smell with the onset of night; another blizzard was on the way. Rowan strained to get a look at the distant Adamello glacier before dusk. Reports had the Austrians fortifying their artillery along one of the low lying ridges as they tried to improve their ranging fire, targeting the Italians further up the valley.

Rowan unfastened the top button of his mackinaw for a Pall Mall, the wind biting. The cold was bitter but less sapping than the wet misery of the Western Front. The porch of the mountaineering hut provided little shelter from the elements. But for a brief dose of fresh air, Lt. Guthrie found the solitude refreshing. He paced through the snow. The ache of his recent wound throbbed in his upper leg. It'd been more than two months, but the bullet still twisted and turned like a thorn.

"Anna, you'd enjoy these mountains. Only if..." Rowan paused. A break in the clouds gave way to the rock-needles guarding the cirque above. Their summits brimmed with cornice. "... Maybe if it'd been different, not so much fear."

The kitchen door cracked open, Lt. Corazarri propping the door with his shoulder, his hands full with cooking implements.

"Lt. Guthrie, I cooked up some of my grandmother's Toscanos if you care for one, a spare bottle of Chianti as well," Lt. Corazarri said in a heavy but impeccable English accent.

"Yes, of course," Rowan replied.

He walked inside and sat at the kitchen table. The smells of northern Italy filled the hut. The mountaineer's refuge had been converted into a command post for the duration of the war, far exceeding any comforts Rowan had grown to expect from military life. If it weren't for the lingering hostilities, Rowan may've mistaken the digs for holiday.

"I was just reading your report, Lt. Guthrie-"

"Rowan-"

"-Eh?"

"You can call me Rowan. We're all officers," Rowan said, pouring a large glass of wine.

"I suppose we are. You can call me Enzo," the Italian replied, cooking with one hand and holding the report in the other. "Lt. Captain Rowan Guthrie facing desperate odds on the battlefield of Ypres, December 1917," Enzo quoted, "rallied a counter-offensive with a weakened and novice regiment of roughly one thousand British to attack an enemy contingent estimated at over four thousand veteran German soldiers. Unable to procure additional firepower and operating with scant intelligence, the lieutenant accurately predicted and fended off an initial German push using non-traditional resistance subsequently rushing the battlefield. With the initial counter-attack successful, Lt. Guthrie's regiment went on to eliminate the remaining resistance, pushing the British salient some quarter of a kilometer into the German lines. The tactical victory allowed for a strategic repositioning of the Allied army. His bravery in battle against incalculable odds resulted in the survival of over eight hundred of his regiment and the award of the Victoria Cross,

Britain and the Commonwealth's highest military honor. -Extremely impressive Rowan, if you don't mind me saying. I can see why Allied command sent you south to advise us with our little Austrian problem."

"Haven't really thought about it with those sorts of embellishments," Rowan said, idly staring into the flame of the cobble fireplace. "...Duty as it were." He took another sip of the Chianti.

"You're too humble, lieutenant. Melting snow for drinking, bringing in firewood, cleaning your rifle -those are things that one has to do," Enzo said as he dropped a sizzling sausage onto Rowan's plate. "Forgot to mention that your personal affects were delivered with the supplies this morning." He pointed his greasy fork at a small pine box nearby.

Rowan pried the lid open with his field knife and emptied its contents onto the table. Not much, he thought, not much at all.

"Ah... 'Henry V'! A fan of Shakespeare?" Enzo said, eyeing the tattered cover. "A classic, no? He definitely had an affinity for the Italians, 'Merchant of Venice', 'Two Gentlemen of Verona', 'Romeo and Juliet'- " He sat down to the table.

"My fiancé gave it to me as a gift on the eve of my deployment. It was supposed to give me inspiration." Rowan picked up the water-warped book. A picture fell from its pages.

"Did it?" Enzo asked, diving into his meal.

"I suppose. But not the inspiration I'd expected -more of a diversion." Rowan leaned back in his chair and held the small photograph to the light.

"Is that her?"

Rowan passed him the photo.

"Not that I've often found myself walking the streets of London, but I must say this is one of the most beautiful British girls I've laid eyes on -those eyes... Were you on holiday?"

"Brighton, down on the Channel, the day I proposed to her. We were off to the regatta and then to dinner at the hotel -a glorious June day," Rowan said, taking another sip.

"Well my Scottish friend... you are a Scotsman, no?"

Rowan nodded.

"I hope your deployment here to our fair country will be swift so you can make your wedding date. Maybe if I climbed down the mountain with this photograph and reasoned with those Austrian bastards they'd pack it in and go home, no? Only if there were more beautiful women in the world we wouldn't feel so inclined to go at each other's throat." Enzo laughed and handed Rowan back the photograph.

"There's no wedding date."

Enzo looked at him, saying nothing.

"She'd met someone else while I was deployed in Ypres. I received a letter." Rowan eyed the envelope tucked in the box. "I just haven't gotten around to getting rid of all this yet."

Enzo's warm Mediterranean features grew sullen. "Oh this miserable war." He scowled. "Not only does our flesh suffer its casualties but our hearts as well, no? I am sorry to hear such news-"

There was a distant boom, quickly dampened by the falling snow.

"Artillery?" Rowan blurted.

"No." Enzo rushed to the hut's door and flung it wide. "-Avalanche."

They dashed into the snowstorm but saw only darkness.

"Where?" he screamed.

Enzio shrugged.

Both strained to listen. The rumble faded from a hiss to a roar. They tried for the hut, but it was too late. The avalanche grabbed hold like a wild animal. Rowan reached for Enzio, only to snag the lieutenant's coat sleeve. Holding on, they tumbled through the crumbly slag and into the accelerating frozen maelstrom.

Darkness and light warped with the jarring freefall, buffeting and bouncing them down the mountainside. Disoriented, Rowan held on to Enzio's wrist and pulled his arm towards him as the frigid flume slowed. The snow melted and refroze seizing his body and freezing his limbs where they lay. Wriggling only made it worse. There was no way to move and no way to escape.

He clenched Enzio's hand with a death grip, but where the rest of him lay, he did not know. Everything was pitch black.

"Enzio!"

The lieutenant's hand grew cold.

"Enzio!"

The Italian's hand twitched spastically then fell limp. Rowan let go as sensation ebbed with the thinning air. Everything slowed. His mind darkened -thoughts and dreams falling apart before they could form. He struggled one last time to regain sense but failed as the last burst of oxygen drifted from his mind. The frozen tomb had claimed him, trapping him beneath an ocean of ice.

[TD] CHAPTER ONE

"Wake up," said the voice. "Wake up, dead man."

"I don't think I've the chemistry right," said another. The accent was thick and unfamiliar. "He's going into arcoana. Look at the eyes."

Images flashed through Rowan's mind at dizzying speeds. He strained to blink, but his eyelids would not open. Thoughts were neither tangible nor real, bouncing around his head like a dream. All reference was gone replaced by a murky half-conscious haze that clouded his wits.

"Slow the refresh. It's starting to take."

The images slowed on cue. Enough that he began to distinguish shape and form. Black shadows mutated into faintly recognizable objects -people -buildings -mountains. Like the shock of half resolved familiarity it was a maddening amnesia.

"I'm seeing activity in the bioreceptors. Stop the filter for a moment, Jorunn. It looks like the current's coming up on the cortex monitor-"

"How can you tell?"

"Right there, look... phasing in quadrature-"

"I've got it now. I'm starting to see an associative response."

His sense of self was returning. Numb sensation accompanied flashes of open water, an ocean with greenish cool like the wind whipped chop of the English Channel. He'd traveled a long distance - somewhere over an unknown horizon far from home. Faces drifted by -relatives, friends, and the people he'd grown up with, worked with and served with. There'd been a war. He'd been a soldier.

"I've got access to the interface. Beginning stabilization-"

"Not possible, Finn."

"It looks like we're going to be able to achieve total functionality."

She was beautiful but forbidden; he knew her face. It glowed despite a sickly light. Who was she? He strained to remember. Soft curled strands of shiny hair poured down from beneath her bonnet as blue eyes pierced the memory fog. She was untouchable. Her face blurred in the mists of an unmeasured time. With a strobe she vanished.

"He's crying!"

"It just looks that way. -Tune the svartblod filter. We're getting too much of the cellemaskin into the mixture."

"Stabilizing."

A cool rush of fluid flowed through Rowan's extremities.

"Have you ever seen that before? Look. He's perspiring."

"No... -maybe -I don't know."

"It might be seep. The mixture may be too thin."

Rowan felt eye sockets seal around clammy masses, numb and prickly like a limb that had fallen asleep. He remembered the war. His mind's muddied silt was starting to settle. He'd been wounded fighting an army to the East. The enemy was distant, but he recognized their faces as both struggled to gain ground while locked in a dire battle of attrition. There was an imminent attack then flashes of horror. He strained to hear their guttural voices from over the battlefield. The voices lording over him now grew clear as his ears sparked to life, their accents familiar.

"Hun bastards," Rowan gurgled synthetically.

"He's speaking, real rough though. See if you can't alter his vocal rhythms. The cellemaskin programming is detuned."

"I'm getting throughput on the altered chemistry -what's he saying?"

Images merged into a blue glow as he opened unstable eyes. Blurs gave way to an oval chamber stretching out before him. Its space was large and threatening. Organic chairs cast shadows over the low ceiling backlit by encircling ambient lamps. All the chairs were empty except his. There was an alcove, in it the enormous face of an old man. Bearded with fierce features, it was a ghostly and menacing sculpture. Shadows lurked in his periphery. He strained to focus his sluggish vision and noticed machines on carts wheeled next to him. Tubes of fluid piped dark mixtures into a matrix of intravenous avenues that perforated his body.

"What'd he say?"

"Couldn't hear it. It takes a few seconds for the alkaline to catch the signal."

Unfamiliar insect-chirps and hums distorted sound like acoustic lenses unable to focus. Everything was beyond explanation or reason. A dark figure leaned in.

"Huns! Who are you?"

"Finn, he thinks he's still at war! He thinks we're the Kaiser's Army! This is unbelievable. I thought a month would've been unfeasible but this -they said it was impossible."

"Jorunn!" The man called Finn focused on an electrical console nearby. "Watch yourself. We've orders from Sverre to handle him carefully."

"Should we say something?"

"We've said too much as it is. He's almost fully responsive. The interface has stabilized. The cerebral monitor is autonomously regulating the cellemaskin. I'm going to shut off the broadcast."

"It'll take awhile before he's ambulatory. The hard freeze slowed the infusion."

There was panic. This body was not his own. With sensation betrayed, a scream welled in the back of his throat as convulsions warped his body. It was a freezing spasm like a burst of frost. He reached for his chest, but his hands were restrained. There was no beat inside his ribcage, no throb in his neck, and no flow of blood; the familiar flutter was gone. Veins in his limbs tingled from a ghostly presence. The engine driving his mortal coil had ceased and was functioning in an alien way.

"I think the control dopant is taking. He's undergoing Skikk," Finn said.

Rowan strained to look at the man. The thick accent defied his skin color. He was dark with exotic features indicative of Oceania or a southern continent.

"I'm drowning," Rowan hollered. His lungs felt empty and hollow.

"The last cycle's completed. He should be stable soon. The rest is up to him," Finn explained. He walked over to one of the empty chairs and sat down. Leaning forward, he gave Rowan a good once over. "He's a masterpiece. This should earn us a promotion. I hear Sverre's moving onto third tier and they're looking for a management officer. It might be worth pursuing." He slumped back into his chair.

"Help me!" Rowan wailed.

"Finn, I'm going to say something-"

"We were told not to. Sverre said he'd be here shortly to attend to it."

Rowan tried to breathe but couldn't. He strained but was unable to coax his diaphragm. He felt like a gasping fish out of water, but he was conscious and alive. The insanity diminished minute-by-minute as hypothermic euphoria started to overwhelm him. The need to scream faded into a cool wall of electricity. He was growing more comfortable with his strange new form.

"How's our traveler?" A voice echoed through the chamber.

"Sverre! -Good. We're finished. I thought it would've been impossible." Finn got up from his chair to greet the senior officer. "He's very strong and resilient. It's as if he hadn't lost a moment -all that time compressed into seconds. We augmented the svartblod primer's acidity. It did the trick."

"He's a loud one Herr Berjon," Jorunn laughed. "Keeps crying out. He thinks we're Germans." He unplugged the last of the svartblod tubes from the tuning machine and rolled the cart back into the shadows.

"The chairmen of Skjærsild and the Tyrians have taken keen interest in this project and have invested much in its success. Move him into the antechamber, and I'll start the profile."

With a lurch, Rowan's chair glided into the center of the room and into the hallway beyond. Brilliance overwhelmed him as the three men escorted him through a maze of confusing lights and twisting corridors. Their conversation faded, swamped by sounds of sharp footsteps and the soft whir of the hover-chair. Doors opened and promptly closed. Walls disintegrated into the air only to

materialize again out of nothing. Other people passed by, their features also mysterious and exotic. Some paused to have a look while others continued on with their normal business. But to Rowan there was nothing normal about this place or these people. There was no compass to gain bearings and no star to guide him. He was completely lost.

A green glow greeted him as the chair floated into another awkward room, smaller than the one they'd just come from. The man called Sverre sat down at a spartan desk across from him.

"Let me have another look at his cerebral monitors." Finn inspected the shimmering array of tiny lights embedded in the chair. "He's in arcoma Herr Berjon. Primary Skikk is complete." Finn was astonished. "Don't know about Jorunn, but I'm going to need Skikk if I don't get some sleep," he chuckled.

Jorunn sighed, exhausted. "He's all yours, Sverre. I'll have the technicians prep his hosloft. He's going to need svartblod filtering soon. Just to warn you."

Sverre leaned back in his chair. "Thanks for the hard work. Skjærsild's fortunate to have you in their service. I'll make sure you're both recommended for second tier."

"Thank you, sir." The men departed.

Silence filled the room. Sverre sat transfixed at the sight of his new acquaintance, gawking at him like museum art. He'd a chiseled swarthy face and dark wide eyes that leered. Rowan couldn't recall anyone like him in person or in pictures. His black hair was finely cut and starched. His olive skin crawled with tribal tattoos all the way to the neckline. Sverre's grin was unmoving. He

looked like a savage more at home in a tropical forest than a desk.

"Am I a prisoner of war?"

"No," Sverre replied. "You're not a prisoner. More of a patient."

"I don't recognize you but your voice... I can barely understand you -that bloody German accent."

"My name's Sverre Berjon of Ny Æsiri's Skjærsild subsidiary in Midgard. We speak a version of Northern Eurasian dialects, a mix of the English language and a bit of Norse -pidgin to you. You're shrewd Herr Guthrie. Jorunn and Finn did an exceptional job." His lean fingers tapped the polished desk. He continued, "We're not your enemy. Your enemies met their demise some time ago. Foremost, we're a distinct people of Earth and a modern race. You'll learn more about us later. You're a war hero, no?" Sverre was trying to change the subject.

"I don't know what you mean? -Ny Æsiri? -Midgard?" He struggled against the chair straps. "Why am I restrained?" Rowan looked at the belts wound around his wrists. He struggled against them with inhuman strength. Black welts tore into pale flesh. He let loose a mechanical wowl.

"Please, Lt. Guthrie," Sverre pleaded as he waved his palm in an attempt to calm him. "You're not ready and will only upset yourself. It's time for you to focus. Concentrate on my words. Don't let your physiology get the best of you. The arcoma has stabilized, but if you push it, you'll end up in coma."

"Arcoma?-"

"-How old are you, lieutenant?"

"I'm thirty one years old. I was born in 1887 - the third child of four."

"I see. Keep talking. You were the commanding officer of His Majesties 242nd Regiment during World War One-"

"World War One?-"

"The 'War to End All Wars', the 'Great War'? - What were you before you were a soldier?" Sverre asked. "I'm your friend, lieutenant. This isn't an interrogation. You've undergone an event. Think of me as your guide -Did you have a vocation from your life before the war?"

"I was a surveyor for the British railroads in Manchester on the Liverpool line. I worked there before I volunteered," Rowan explained.

"And before that?" Sverre asked, leaning forward.

"-A student at Manchester's Institute of Technology, studying civil engineering. The first in my family to attend university."

An artificial calm quieted Rowan as Sverre continued to talk. The cadence of his voice was unique. He'd heard nothing like it before. The man's words had poetic rhythm.

"Your family?"

"I grew up in Scotland. My father worked at the granite quarries in Dumfries. We didn't have much money, so I worked through university." He continued to ramble, not knowing what exactly to say. "I didn't much fit in. I spent a great deal of time in the library studying. It was quieter." Rowan's voice trailed off.

Sverre diverted his attention as he placed an assortment of objects on the desk. A sparkle caught Rowan's eye, something hidden among the bits and pieces. It was small but brilliant -even in the mint glow of the antechamber.

"What are these things?" Rowan asked.

"Do you recognize something?" Sverre said as he reached for the tattered ribbon of a war medal. "Quite the artifact, crafted from the Russian guns of the Crimea. Only fifteen hundred and eighty five were awarded, the Victoria Cross for gallantry in the face of the enemy." Sverre held up the object, hypnotized.

"I know that shine. The ring -can you bring it to me?"

"This over here?" Sverre reached across the table again and pulled a tarnished watch chain and ring from the clutter. Sverre placed it into his restrained hand. Rowan's eyes widened to absorb the half-carat glimmer as Sverre looked on, puzzled.

"My uncle was a jeweler in Edinburgh. I commissioned him to cast the setting. The stone he purchased wholesale from the Watford Hasidim," Rowan explained. Silence filled the room until he looked up into Sverre's curious eyes and asked, "Is this Hell?"

"Herr Guthrie, this is neither Heaven nor Hell," Sverre laughed uncomfortably. "This is Earth!"

"It feels like The Judgment. These things from my life -the medal -this ring -you asking me questions about my past..." Rowan muttered. He tightened his grip around the ring and chain.

"The ring was intended for a woman, yes?" Sverre reached over, grabbed a glass block, and held it in front of him. It was a photo encased inside a slab of crystal. The picture was of his long lost Anna, the photo he'd handed Lt. Corazarri before the avalanche.

"Her father was the librarian where I used to study. During the winter term she shelved reference journals to earn extra money. That's

when she stumbled across me, tucked away and studying for an exam. I was so tired. She felt like an angel..." His voice faded to a whisper. Sverre sat down again, visibly confused by Rowan's melancholy.

"I take it you left for the Front before you were able to wed?"

"In a sense." Rowan relaxed his grip. "I'd say this much -it was the Great War that ended the engagement. It wouldn't have mattered if we'd wed. She'd resigned me to my fate. I'd no control over it."

"Herr Guthrie, you're a stranger far from the home. And in truth, you'll not be able to return. It's complicated and in time you'll understand. Don't despair. You're among friends and admirers," Sverre said. The sound of footsteps approached. Rowan craned his neck. A young technician entered and walked over to Sverre to whisper something.

"It looks like they're ready to prep you for your svartblod filtering. Tormod will escort you to the katedral and show you to your hosloft afterward. You'll be able to further recuperate there. I look forward to our continued conversations."

With a lurch and a whir the chair slid out of the room and back into the maze of corridors.

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Something was missing but Rowan couldn't place it. A large curved sofa encircled a low tabletop. Behind, lay a sprawling bed absent sheets or pillows. An enormous frosted window stretched the length of the living space from floor to ceiling like a monolithic colorless pane of stained glass. It was translucent but not fully transparent. Thin still shadows loomed from behind, overwhelmed by a

diffuse gray reminiscent of autumn days in Manchester.

He was able to walk now. Whatever procedure they'd performed allowed for primitive control of his motor functions. It was all very difficult and tedious. Whoever these people were, they lacked a definite fascination for things. The walls were ominously empty, the tabletops bare, and the furniture minimal and awkwardly arranged. It was too large a room for Rowan's liking. Its space demanded attention. With slow jilted steps, he made a circuit of the three walls and window, pacing his new surroundings like a caged animal.

He walked over and sat down on the edge of the bed. Its firmness gave way as it gelled around his waist. He was dressed in paper-pajamas outfitted with pockets. They were charcoal-colored drab with small flaps around the lower chest concealing an assortment of facets and tubes that snaked their way into his motionless ribcage. He rolled back one of the sleeves, exposing the pale-blue flesh of his forearm. Small vein-like lattices scattered underneath the epidermal in spider web patterns. What they were? -Rowan hadn't the slimmest notion. Their highly ordered appearance was mechanical not bacterial or parasitic. Rowan raked his black fingernails over them. There was no sensation at all.

Pain and caress were jumbled into a singular touch of numb pressure that passed as sense. The engineers had mentioned something about a freeze, something to do with the avalanche and ice. His frostbitten flesh had survived unscathed and capable. There was a black magic working inside him, transmogrified into an incarnation Aleister Crowley might've conjured from the underworld.

He rolled his sleeves down and pulled a pant leg up and over his knee. The cloth had an abrasive yet delicate texture but did not rip or tear. There were more blotches peppering his calves and knees, thicker around the joints. Searching his right thigh he spotted the black and raised half-moon scar. His body may've felt alien but this left no doubt, it was the entry point of the Mauser bullet. He studied it closer, noting the zigzagged ridge of the old stitches. In disbelief, he quickly pulled the pant leg down.

There was a clock mounted on the wall with its familiar two hands and face. It read three o'clock -but whether it was a.m. or p.m. he wasn't sure. A military clock would've been too much to ask. He leaned back on the bed and shut his eyes. The strange surface of the bed warped and conformed to his every bend as he settled in.

A few minutes slipped by, but sleep failed to arrive. He opened his eyes again and saw the glow from the large window muted by evening darkness. The shadows outside had transformed into thin cones of blurred light, shimmering like visual music. Artificial illumination bled into the room from the corners of the hosloft's ceiling. Startled, Rowan walked over to the wall clock and noticed the hands had slipped to eleven o'clock. Was it night? He was sure he hadn't been asleep. If he wasn't mad already, this place was giving him a go.

Something had changed -somebody had entered the room. On the once bare table now sat things familiar and unknown. He rummaged through the items and noticed Anna's engagement ring on the watch chain. He unlatched the clasp and put on the makeshift necklace. The Victoria Cross lay there

as well. He pushed it aside and grabbed a shabby canvas satchel. Inside were a few items from his old military battle order.

He pulled out a collapsible field blade and unfolded it. The brushed steel blurred his reflection as he held it close. He slid the edge across his deadened flesh; the knife was still sharp. Setting it down he picked up his old whiskey flask, unscrewed the brass lid, and tried to take a whiff, but his lungs failed to stir. He tilted the flask letting a few paltry drops pool onto the smooth table. Scraping the whiskey with his knife, he saw the faint amber of the old Johnny Walker.

He continued to rummage but his Swiss pocket watch was nowhere. Whatever had happened, the watch must've been lost along the way. More peculiar still was his old gasmask and respirator. The rubber was cracked and brittle. The tears and rips around the goggles had rendered it useless.

"I can't even breath," Rowan said confused, tossing the mask to the side.

He picked up the glass slab with Anna's picture. The photo had yellowed and her features were grainy but the impression was the same. The sun had caught her smile as she held her hands shyly. He focused on the planks of the boardwalk -all comfortably familiar. It was a place on a map, somewhere he knew well... home. But in the clinical confines of this strange hosloft, he felt displaced.

The last item in his kit was his navigation compass. He flipped it open and noticed the mirror was removed -not cracked or shattered, just gone. Someone had fiddled with it; the needle was frozen

in place, the suspension oil drained from cracks in the casing.

"All worthless," Rowan sighed.

His visitors had left him a wine set of sorts. A large insulated carafe of dark blue liquid sat near a set of fluted glasses. It was obviously intended for him, even though he lacked any sense of thirst. Regardless, he poured the fluid into the glass. It left a head of seltzer fizz as swirling bubbles welled up from the bottom. Sensing a chemical energy inside, he held the simmering mix to his lips. Rowan took a small sip. Expecting no flavor, he found himself overwhelmed with a tart burst of taste. He couldn't place it, but it had a dose of citrus blended with honey and chocolate. He guzzled the rest and poured more until the carafe was empty. His hands started to tremble.

Energy flowed through his body in waves as his fingertips twitched uncontrollably. An agitation clouded his mind blending thoughts into a crowded chorus of nonsense like manic hysteria. Memories streamed by with a dreamlike logic.

Rowan grabbed his knife and unfolded the blade. He needed to concentrate on something to settle himself. He attempted a feat of mumblypeg but failed. There was no chance; his hands were shaking too badly. He fumbled with the knife again until he grabbed hold of the handle. With his other palm flat to the table, he picked at the frayed cuticles of his fingernails and cut at the sub-dermal webbing in his knuckles. He was overdosing.

Reaching a chemical climax, Rowan slashed at the knuckle of his pinky finger. He threw his weight into the blade, wiggling and sawing at the joint

until he heard a pop. He tossed the blade back to the table and shattered the drinking glass. Rowan looked at the severed digit. There was no blood. Instead, black syrup welled around the wound until the white of the bone stub completely disappeared. There was no pain.

Fascinated, he held his finger to the light. Like a freezing snowflake, small crystals spiraled over the wound sealing it like a mechanical scab. Small drops of yellow water seeped from the rest of his hand like sweat. Phantasmagoric curiosity kept him gazing at the self-inflicted amputation.

The wound had sealed itself when yellow pulses of light throbbed overhead. Frozen fog erupted from floor vents as the lights cycled in paralyzing flashing patterns. He could not move or lower his arm as a rigor mortis set in. The condensed vapors deposited a thick frost on his clothes and body, locking his eyes in their sockets. He was paralyzed -body and mind a prison.

#

Fog stretched out far below, swallowing the horizon as sea birds hovered effortlessly on steady updrafts. The silver haze overwhelmed Rowan's eyes as he looked out from the lofty vantage of Sverre's office. He wasn't sure what he was looking at exactly. Everything was confused. There was an intimidating man sitting at the end of a long sofa wearing eyeshades, still as stone.

The stranger leaned over and whispered something to Sverre. His chest was broad and solid with musculature. A square jaw hung from chiseled cheekbones. Aggressive tattooing covered his face like a South Seas warrior. His body art was more impressive than any Rowan had seen yet. They

stopped whispering and Sverre walked over. Rowan was again restrained.

"Who's that man?"

"This is Kommandant Sigurd Asperheim. He's here to observe you," Sverre explained. Sigurd nodded. Sverre noticed the stub of Rowan's severed pinky. "I see you've had complications during your Skikk recovery."

"Lt. Peters was right to be weary of my sanity. My mind's sick like Richards," Rowan rambled.

"Richards?" Sverre said confused.

"Lt. Richards, a commander in my corps at Ypres. He'd gone insane during an offensive and killed himself. Some said it was fever, others shellshock, but I knew what it was; he was insane like I'm insane." Rowan wiggled what remained of his little finger. "My eyes betray me."

"You're not insane. You've undergone a process," Sverre said. "When Ragna came to attend to you she forgot to deliver the soveaske. It would've induced a sleep cycle and stopped your overdosing. Forgive her. She's new to her custodial duties. The hydrokraft caused electrochemical shock, saturating your neurological synthesis. We had to paralyze you before you did more damage."

"My mind was idling like an engine. Time passed but I was unaware. I shut my eyes but my thoughts remained. There was no sleep -nothing I recognized as such."

"Haven't you told him what he is?" asked Sigurd, his voice deep.

"Not yet. That's what this is about. It's much easier with the rest, but Rowan's more delicate. This must be handled carefully or we risk coma." Sverre explained. He turned back to Rowan. "Herr Guthrie, what I'm going to tell you, you will have

a hard time fathoming, but I ask you to dismiss notions of insanity-"

"-I won't believe you."

"You don't have to believe me now, just listen," Sverre said. "Thirty years ago a Surtur deep-lock survey team was working on the Dolomite Ice Sheet looking for an elusive thermal vent when they discovered a perfectly preserved archaeology site thousands of feet below the glacial crust. It was an anoxic hyper-cooled water pocket, a result of carbon dioxide and sulfates filtering up from the earth's bowels for hundreds of years. In the ruins of an alpine shelter, they found the jumbled remains of a soldier and his personal affects. Surtur's glasere-divers excavated what they could and delivered the soldier to Skjærsild. The man had been frozen in the glacier for over a thousand years."

"I don't bloody understand any of this."

"-Lt. Rowan Guthrie, that soldier was you," Sverre said.

Rowan sat back and attempted to reason his way out of the insanity of his Gulliverian predicament. Like war, there was a determined rationalism to be found in the depths of a depraved madness. He'd no other recourse but to believe what the strangers told him. It would be up to him to sort it out -to insure their version of the truth matched his own. He had to keep an open mind.

"I was a military attaché advising the Italians. There was an avalanche. That's the last I remember. We tried to find shelter but the avalanche was so quick -Did you find Lt. Corazzari? He was with me at the time," Rowan muttered.

"No, Herr Guthrie, we didn't. We barely found you. It was chance that led us to your body, so well preserved. A chemical, biological, and physical marvel that we'll likely never see again."

"A thousand years?" Rowan blurted, regaining focus. "You talk like I'm some mummy dug up from the desert sand, but I'm here talking to you, whoever you people are."

"That's because-" Sverre paused and glanced at Sigurd, "-You're dead, lieutenant, even as you sit here talking with me now. But let there be no mistake, you've not yet passed from this world."

"Not true," Rowan laughed, "I can speak and walk. I can think."

"You walk the dusk of two worlds. You're one of the undead -an individual no longer alive but not yet deceased. You're what the Skjærsild calls dysterfolk, the dark people."

Rowan failed to appreciate the explanation of his untimely demise. The mechanics of his body felt corpse-like, but his mind functioned in the twilight of reason. His touch was too deadened to feel heat, but the pale blue of his skin was definitely not of the living. He was a sentience in search of a vessel.

"I don't breathe -my heart doesn't beat- and when I severed my finger, there was no pain," Rowan stammered.

"You've undergone a process called Skikk, synthetic reanimation of your cadaver. It's a process we've been trying to perfect at Skjærsild for years. Recent achievements have delivered successes never thought possible. Subjects deceased for weeks have completed Skikk successfully, but you're a triumph!" Sverre

exclaimed. "The key to the process is the cellemaskin in the svartblod emulsion, microscopic cellular machines that build electromechanical networks in your necrotic body-"

Rowan stammered, "You've mad me an abomination? Some creature from a gothic nightmare?"

"Not at all," Sverre said excitedly. "Think of yourself-"

"-Think of yourself as a clumsy larva hatched from its chrysalis, now transformed into a graceful winged insect," Sigurd interrupted. He got up to look him in the eye. "You're uniquely fortunate, Lt. Guthrie. To be given the gift of immortality -it's something you may not have asked for, but a gift you'll grow to appreciate it." Rowan got a better look at him. He was a military man, wearing loose utilitarian fatigues. There was something about him he did not particularly care for, an arrogance he couldn't place.

"Grow to appreciate? You've made me a monster!" Rowan hollered.

"Lieutenant," Sigurd said calmly, crouching down to meet his gaze. "There's a thirst in every man to cheat the cruel fate death doles out. After all you've experienced -all the pain and loss, everything you had taken away so freakishly, so mercilessly..." Sigurd pulled away his shades and revealed eager eyes. "-You'll learn more about our world in time and see its opportunities. Think of all those you've left behind, lost in the ebb of time's ruthless march. They've failed in their legacy but you've succeeded. That world abandoned you, but this world's yours for redemption -an immortality able to vindicate doubt, an avenue to test your meddle and cheat fate, posthumously condemning all those who may've doubted you."

"Please sirs, a mirror," Rowan asked meekly. Sigurd turned to Sverre and nodded. He grabbed a mirror from his desk and held it in front of him. It was the one confiscated from his field compass. They'd kept it from him. He squinted -too afraid to look but too curious to resist. He opened his eyes wide and stared.

It was the face of a stranger, a ghost image resembling that of a man's but absent its soul. Black-upon-black eyes gazed fishlike at him from an unrecognizable face. Sharp cheekbones tented and stretched his skin anchored by a ghoulis cleft chin. His skull was covered with bristly hair that hid a leathery scalp, and his teeth were coated with a metallic tint of penny copper masking any well-intentioned smile with a grotesque scowl. He'd become the twisted creation of otherworldly taxidermists.

Losing his composure, he turned away from the reflection as gasps of tearless sobs burst from idle lungs. As he cried, he noticed a synthetic reverberation to his voice, artificial and machine-like.

Rowan sobbed freakishly.

"He's crying. Amazing!"

[TD] CHAPTER TWO

Lt. Rowan Guthrie's sector was quiet. He'd ordered his men to re-enforce Lt. Richards' position the previous evening leaving him with just a skeleton crew. He pulled out a crumpled pack of Pall Malls and struck a flint. The smoke filled him, drying out the morning damp.

"Here's to you brother." Rowan took a swig from his flask. "I'd almost trade you places in this miserable drama... almost."

The lad had been there for days. The boy wasn't older than seventeen, a scout sent into the obstacle fields to set up a listening post. Too close to the British Vickers and too far to retreat from German artillery, the soldier had unwittingly been led into the crossfire.

Death had not been kind to the Hun. The rats had nibbled away the body piecemeal leaving him with little more than a lipless grimace. The barbed wire, duckboards, and soaked sandbags framed the corpse as if someone had meticulously posed the body like an artist's model. Rowan leaned in for a closer look. He pinched his eyes to blur the color, impressionist dabs painting his macula with a macabre palette. If the horror could've been laid to canvas some two-bit collector might have hawked it as fine art, but in the morning's ghoulish light, it was little more than offal.

The Big Berthas had worked over the lieutenant's forward lines, blasting away a chain of monstrous craters near the corkscrews. The churned dirt - collapsed from the teetering parapets- formed a mud ramp that funneled into stagnant bloody pools.

The Bosch had nowhere to go. It was either die by his mate's shelling or scramble the rotten muck and face getting ripped to shreds by Tommy fusillade, a quick and sloppy end.

The impact had flung the soldier through the air into the trench like a thunderstorm dropping frogs from Biblical skies. It was darkly comical. Dazed, Rowan remembered the thud when the German had hit the sandbags. There was an anemic groan and a splash as the crumpled body toppled head first from the paradoss.

He sat up from the firestep. Mesmerized by the spectacle and unable to look away, he crept closer, wisps of cigarette smoke eddying and swirling around the stranger's bloated face. Like Gypsy tealeaves, the Bosch held a dark magic that concealed primitive knowledge.

"Who were you?"

The soldier's battered fingers lay limp. Soft and young, they'd been spared a lifetime of factory work. Rowan wondered where those hands had been during the lad's short life, caressing a sweetheart's cheek, holding a squirming toad, mucking it about with mates... Now it was all gone in a collision of shredded steel and flesh. Annihilated in a split instant. He paused and looked at his own barked grimy knuckles.

"Just a boy." Rowan finished his Pall Mall and chucked the fag into the listless trench water.

Rowan looked through his periscope. The frozen morning had distilled the Front's gloom into finely tuned misery. The fog from No Man's Land bled the sun's warmth, casting a pall over the battlefield's churned loam and frayed wire. Lewis guns probed the murk from a nearby pillbox, faceless gunners stalking the wastes.

He pulled out his pocket watch. It was six o'clock and third watch was almost over. With the exodus of his regiment to Lt. Richards' position, he was desperate for reinforcement.

Rowan lit a lamp near his radio kit, the Marconi's battery leaking acid into the brittle floorboards beneath. His dugout smelled of sour sweat and trench foot. The frontlines offered little luxury to its officer class. The same filth and disease permeated the ranks without prejudice. He unlocked his footlocker and pulled a codebook from underneath his last dry greyback. The Hun's had broken his ciphers; he was certain. The German's recent moves had been perfectly timed to his own regiment's maneuvers. It was no coincidence. Intelligence dismissed the idea. Despite the absurdity, Rowan continued to use the cracked codes for fear of prosecution. The brass saw un-coded communiqués as an act of treason, negligence and dereliction, crimes punishable by firing squad. The whole charade was completely insane.

The lieutenant keyed the rusty tap, 'Send runner.' Seconds passed, then a reply of mechanical beeps. Scribbling down the Morse on a water-warped tablet, he read the message out loud, 'One half hour.'

"Damn!" He threw the pencil down. "I could swim the Channel towing a whole bloody regiment quicker."

The reserve trench was only a few hundred yards, but breakfast was sacred like the Sabbath. He wouldn't see a runner until well past the percolator had finished its daily duty. It mattered little he supposed; the Huns knew better than to interrupt the breakfast truces. The Great

War was too much for both sides to bear on empty stomachs.

Rowan put on the Dixie kettle and nibbled a stale biscuit. Seconds turned into minutes as he reclined on his field cot and continued to stare at the ghastly display outside.

"Lt. Guthrie!" It was Rogers.

"Yes, corporal?"

"What you lookin' at?" Rogers said, turning around. "That filthy bugger? Hell lieutenant! We can scrape up that fusty Hun and toss 'em if the smells too much."

Rowan looked at him dumbly.

"I'll get a few Tommies to roll that filthy Alleyman over the top and into that pit yonder."

"If you could get the lads to take that German out to the Amiens, they'll lime him properly-"

"-But lieutenant... It's just an old rotten Hun!"

"I don't care. We've had enough dysentery plaguing the regiment, and I'll not let this sorry bloke make my boys ill. If we could just dispose of the dead properly we'd save ourselves a lifetime of vomiting and trots."

"Suit yourself, lieutenant," Rogers said, befuddled. "When's the old pals battalion coming back from Lt. Richards' detachment, eh? Didn't want to be the bearing of bad tidings but Williams and I've been spotting some movement out near the wire. Looks like the Huns got something up their sleeve. Might be a feint, grill the hell out of us here, crawl over to Richards' position then sneak back in the night to make a push, right when we least suspect it."

"The brass is sending a runner. I'll order my men back and get some fresh Tommies to share the brunt. There shouldn't be trouble."

"You might want a look, lieutenant," Rogers said anxiously.

Rowan followed Rogers through the maze of saps to the sentry lookout. Ammunition boxes crowded the claustrophobic bunker, the smell of urine and gun grease filling the cramped space. Rowan was lucky Rogers and Williams were bantams or they'd soon have throttled each other. It was an excruciatingly dismal post.

"You still see 'em, Williams?" Rogers asked.

"Yeah, Yeah."

Private Williams was crouched at the narrow gunner slit, field glasses in hand.

"They're movin' in a battery of howitzer case-shot. Tenacious buggers, they're bringing 'em in piece-by-piece. No caissons though. Don't look good to me, lieutenant. Not much movement. Knowin' them Huns, they're always skulkin' around getting ready to push when you least suspect it."

"Williams, hand me your range finder."

Rowan moved up to the slit and surveyed the muddy barrens. No Man's Land stretched out past the sentry post, obscured by the leaden glow of lifting mist.

The December sun muddled shape and form, distorting the chaos of pillared barricades and tangled barbed wire. He searched for signs of life but saw only a few plump rats waddling from corpse to corpse. There was no sign of the Pickelhaubes. The Huns were currently preoccupied.

"It's quiet, Rogers, no covering party and no howitzers."

"The light has to catch it right, sir. Look past the perimeter, near the sap lines."

Rogers grabbed Rowan's shoulders and pointed him into the fog. A minute passed. Then a break in the

haze revealed what Lt. Guthrie feared. Recalling the most recent bombardment, there'd been a brief respite stretching into a nerve-racking episode lasting days. It'd provoked Rowan's suspicions. He was beginning to regret reinforcing Lt. Richards' when the sinister outline of a howitzer battery emerged from the mist.

"Damn! Only a few hundred yards," Rowan cursed. "Bold bastards."

"Looking to give us a good box barrage, eh?"

"Not sure but what I am sure of is this..." pausing to light a Pall Mall, "We're going to need reinforcement."

"Yeah?" Williams grumbled. "Ah, bloody hell."

Rowan was queasy. The Germans were set to push in the next couple of days and with Lt. Richards under siege, it was unlikely the brass would order back the bulk of his regiment. He'd few options. Crawling out from the spider hole, he leaned against the bunker and finished his Pall Mall.

"Sir, stay down!" Rogers shouted, peering through the dugout's mud caked opening. "Hun snipers are about. Be careful!"

"Fog's too thick and rumor is we killed their best two snipers last week in that chlorine attack. No Blighty wounds yet, lads. Knock on wood." Rowan winked. "Hold your position and stay sharp. I'll make sure the Huns stay put."

"You've got a plan, lieutenant?" Rogers said, fidgeting.

"Aye," Rowan nodded. "You got yourselves enough iron rations?"

"We're topped. Though we're runnin' low on the coffin nails," Williams replied.

"Here lads." Rowan tossed him his pack of Pall Malls. "Stay sharp. Those fags make for a nice

rosy target at night."

"Right, lieutenant!"

Rowan headed back through the watery trenchworks. With his constitution rattled, he stumbled through the knee-deep mud, anxious and nauseous. Something was amiss. The offensive in Lt. Richards' sector was a feint, a way for the Huns to bleed Rowan's ranks. Like an elusive checkmate, it suddenly made dreadful sense. The Germans were setting up to attack at the 242nd's soft underbelly. It was brilliant scheme. Too bad he hadn't thought of it first. There'd be no quarter for such a tactical transgression. The Bosch weren't big on second chances.

A ruddy Tommy loitered near Rowan's dugout when he returned, a canvas mailbag at his feet. The private's glum face left Rowan despondent, bad news for sure.

"At ease, Private..."

"-McGregor, sir!"

"-McGregor, a fellow Scotsman eh? Come in." Rowan glowered at two nearby soldiers conspicuously eavesdropping. "You lot! Get a field stretcher and clear that Alleyman. Bugger will make you sick rotting away, and I'll not have you missing out on a good scrap with those Hun bastards vomiting your bully beef."

"Sir!"

"Quite a twist getting to your post, sir. You're right up here on the Hun's doorstep," McGregor said, staring oddly at the whistling Dixie kettle Rowan had long forgotten.

"So close you can read by tracer fire," Rowan joked as he pulled the neglected near-empty kettle from the stove. "I'd offer you some tea but..."

"-No thanks, sir. Much obliged. I'm afraid I've disappointing news."

"I've a suspicion what you're going to tell me, McGregor. I haven't seen a face that long since I served in the 2nd cavalry regiment. The Huns are reinforcing across from my position. Saw 'em this morning. Looks like they let loose a barrage on Richards, bleed us a little then have a go at us while we fiddle about."

"No sir. But that is news."

Rowan was speechless.

"Eh, that a joke? Us Scotsman always have a flair for the yarn," Rowan quipped, reaching into his footlocker for a fresh pack of Pall Malls. "I'm going to need my men back, whatever Richards can spare. I haven't heard the enemy guns since last night. Probably busy rushing those Alleymen back to give me a go. With the offensive over in Richards' sector, I'd give the Huns a good three to four days before they try to push," Rowan said, striking his flint to light the crisp end of his fag.

"Sir," the private paused. "Lt. Richards ordered your detachment over the top yesterday at dusk."

"No jokes, McGregor. I'm serious. I need my men. Deliver my request to Lt. Colonel Jenkins as soon as possible. He'll concur."

"Lt. Guthrie, you don't understand. Lt. Richards ordered your regiment into battle. I'm sorry to be the one to tell you but the push was abortive," Private McGregor said. His eyes fixed to the floor.

Rowan gasped, the color draining from his cheeks. His blue eyes grew wide and vacant. He mumbled something then dropped onto his rickety

cot, the freshly lit cigarette dangling from his lip.

"How many from my regimental detachment?"

"Estimates report eighty men returned out of four hundred and thirteen with twenty-one ambulatory casualties. They hit 'em hard. It was God awful, flamethrowers with a lifting barrage."

"Why in God's name would Richards do such a thing?"

The private shrugged.

Rowan couldn't make sense of it. Richards must've acted on bad information or some rumor that'd led him to slaughter, a spy maybe. Rowan's detachment was beyond decimated with hardly anyone left but a few shell-shocked Tommies. The few soldiers remaining wouldn't be enough to fend off the hordes. Unless Lt. Colonel Jenkins was willing to make concessions there'd be no way to resist the onslaught.

"They were good men. Master Sgt. Higgins was my field officer for a stretch, and he always took kindly to me like an uncle."

"-Higgins too?"

"Yes Sir."

"We'll have to fall back. There's no way to hold the line. It's madness. Lt. Colonel Jenkins will just have to understand."

"That's the other thing. Colonel Jenkins requests your presences back at the Amiens by thirteen hundred. He's aware your predicament and is ready to assign fresh recruits."

"Bloody madness!"

McGregor stammered inaudibly.

"I served five tours with half those blokes and now Jenkins wants to swap 'em with wet-behind-the-ears Tommies? Turn a haphazard lot of quivering

greenhorns into a Black Hand Gang? Not bloody well likely," Rowan seethed.

He'd just explain the situation to Jenkins. And after frank man-to-man, the colonel would be fool not to give Rowan exactly what he needed. Was intelligence unaware of the German repositioning? Disgust simmered. The stale dugout grew uncomfortable as Private McGregor tried to avoid Rowan's tantrum, impotent to help.

"Sorry to be the bearer of bad tidings, sir. On a lighter note, I've brought mail for you and the chaps," McGregor said, setting the mailbag down on the cluttered map table.

"McGregor," Rowan sighed. "Take your leave."

Private McGregor saluted and stomped off through the muck for points unknown.

Rowan relit his Pall Mall and stared idly at the shabby clock under the kerosene lamp. Time was having its way with him, the minutes recklessly marching forward. He was in the grip of uncanny vacillation. His mind clouded with endless scenarios and tactics desperate for a plan to save his rag-tag lot from certain annihilation. It was devastatingly hopeless.

The mailbag was lighter than usual. Poor lads, most would never get their letters, war's brutality stealing away a loved one's last words. He pulled a double wrapped parcel from the top, his name and rank written in cursive across the tattered brown package. With a smile he moved into a shaft of gray light to unwrap it.

The paper fell apart, soaked from the cold wet. Inside he found an envelope along with a wrapped watch box. Interesting, he thought, not like Anna to send valuables through the thieving hands of the army mail depot. He waved the bent envelope

under his nose and breathed deeply. Nothing. She must have forgotten to dab the letter with her Parisian perfume. He lit another cigarette and tore the flap off the frayed envelope.

Dear Rowan,

It is with great pain that I must write you. I can no longer go on with our current arrangement, living in constant fear that I will be visited by news of your passing. It is just too much for me to bear, and that is why I must end our current engagement. I just cannot allow myself to be woken by horrific nightmares and cold sweats, crying. It just hurts too much. I desperately hope you will understand. I beg of you not to feel ill towards me.

I have met someone else. He is a schoolteacher at West Riding School for Boys and cares for me very much. I know how much this must pain you, but I'll have you know he takes loving care of me and is a very honorable gentleman.

Please understand that my thoughts and prayers are with you, regardless of what you might think of me at this moment. I attend church almost nightly in prayer that this terrible war will soon end and you and your regiment will return home, healthy and unharmed.

Sincerely, Anna

"Too late love," Rowan whispered, tears streaming through the grit. With hands shaking and nerves bristling, he dropped the letter.

He opened the watch box to find the timepiece he'd given her. It was the last time he'd seen her, there at the train station in Manchester. She'd glowed like an angel in Sunday formals. He'd forgotten what he'd told her then, but he remembered her melancholy when he'd pulled the timepiece from his parade uniform. Claspig her hand tightly around it, he kissed her small fist and begged her to wind it every day they'd be apart.

He pulled the watch from its small box and heard the faint clink of something slide along the pocket chain. It was her engagement ring. The diamond glistened in the ghoulish light. He pulled the wool flap down over the dugout doorway. He couldn't let his men see their commanding officer in such a state, so weak and dejected.

#

Cpl. Jackson was slumped and tied to a fencepost. His face obscured by matted hair. Blood soaked his uniform, staining it where the sweat and grime had not. Rowan noticed a patch of worn ground beneath his feet. He'd been there all night, tied and hobbled with his knees buckled, frost clinging to the hem of his greyback. The water in the pail near his knees was frozen. Regardless, he looked too exhausted to drink it.

Someone had assigned Jackson Field Punishment Number One and it was beyond Rowan as to wonder why. What else had gone wrong with the Richards' debacle? Cowardice? Treason? It was insane considering the circumstances, and this punishment was an especially nasty one, even for the most disciplinary officer. A slow burn flowed through his veins, warming his achy bones with fiery contempt.

Rowan knelt to the hoarfrost. "Speak up, lad. I see your eyes." Cpl. Jackson looked up and winced.

Jackson mumbled back in a labored whisper.

"What's your crime?"

"Sir?-"

"-Be a good lad and speak up."

"I failed Lt. Richards orders and led my squad back to the sap. He was mad as a bloody hatter."

"-Christ-"

"-It was the fever. When the detachment arrived we found him wild-eyed with the Flu. He hadn't eaten in days -gaunt, covered in lice, and itching like a crazy bugger. Half his men were shell-shocked. Most couldn't tell up from down. Needless to say, his charge had eroded-"

"-God Almighty-"

"-Richards ordered us over the top without gas masks and half our ammunition. He said the heavy battle order would weigh us down," Jackson paused to cough, a wet hack blasting from his lungs. "When I heard the 'poom-poom' from the gas, I turned my men around. We were lucky. The poor sods that'd wormed through the line were immolated by flamethrower. Last I saw of Richards, he was crawlin' around like a beast."

"If he'd gone insane, why'd they punish you?"

"Don't know, sir. They're still investigating and taking statements from the rest of us blokes, trying to piece it together."

"Bloody hell!" Rowan fumed. "Here lad." Rowan gave Jackson a few puffs from his freshly lit cigarette. Rowan was confused. Why on Earth would Lt. Colonel Jenkins permit such lunacy?

"Lt. Guthrie!" boomed a voice from the flap of the Amiens. Rowan stood to find the intimidating

girth of Lt. Colonel Jenkins. His uniform was starched and pristine. A latent salute escaped him. "At ease, lieutenant. Come inside. That's a good gentleman." Rowan looked down at Jackson, still puffing on the wilted cigarette, eyes unfocused and sloe in the dreary light.

"Don't worry, lad. I'll have you out of this in a jiffy. We'll get you some decent food and up with your mates, eh?"

"Yes Sir." Jackson's despondency betrayed his reply.

Poor bloke, Rowan thought. One night in this Flemish cold was enough to make madmen of anyone, saying nothing of the Front's slaughterhouse. There had to be a reasonable explanation.

"Lt. Jenkins, sir! Why is Jackson being punished? Lt. Richards was clearly unfit to command, all delirious with fever -his negligence decimated my whole detachment!" Rowan blurted as he made his way into the tent's shadows. Warmth greeted him. Jenkins pulled a brass teapot from a cast iron stove and poured a cup of tea.

"Settle down, Lt. Guthrie."

The inside of the tent was abuzz. The weather had cleared and men poured over maps, evaluating the most recent reconnaissance, attention fixed on the wavering contours of the shell-ravaged front. A few RFC pilots stood near a billboard directing intelligence officers with red pushpins, most likely assessing the fallout from Richards' failed push.

"Please sit," Jenkins said.

Rowan perched on a collapsible stool as Jenkins sauntered up to a nearby map. "First things first, Richards was found dead late last night with a self inflicted gunshot wound to the head."

"Bloody Hell!" Rowan exclaimed. "Why?"

"We don't know yet. He'd apparently gone completely insane. Shellshock, you understand?"

"I think that much has been sorted out," Rowan said, acknowledging the obvious. "Cpl. Jackson - the one punished outside- said Richards was mad with the Spanish Flu and had ordered all of his men -including my detachment- over the top."

"That's correct. It's all a bloody shame-"

"-A bloody shame? It's a military disaster!"

"Easy now. That's a good gentleman." Jenkins said, taking a sip of his tea. "Apparently his distress call was contrived, some paranoia brought on by his condition. He believed the Huns were going to overrun him. This morning's report by the RFC shows that the barrage was a ruse to reposition. Richards' push was so poorly planned it took just half a Hun regiment to do what they did. Then there was the gas... It was like they knew he'd gone mad." Lt. Jenkins paced and contemplated the predicament.

"A spy?"

"Possibly. It's not been ruled out. We're still investigating."

"What about Corporal Jackson, sir?"

"For the men, lieutenant. You understand-"

"-I regret to say I don't," Rowan blurted.

"Lt. Guthrie, we're in a tight spot! We know about the Hun buildup. If the men catch wind that the command has broken down, then we've lost! We cannot have these blokes questioning authority no matter how dubious. Cpl. Jackson did not follow orders and was punished. We will not tolerate dereliction!" Lt. Colonel Jenkins bloodshot eyes beamed at him, searing with authority.

"Discipline at all costs, sir. I understand."

"Good to see we've agreement. Now back to business-"

"-Right. It's true. I saw it this morning. They're building up a battery a few hundred yards from our lines. I reckon they'll make a push within a week. With not but eighty men from the Richards' detachment and a hundred or so of my original regiment, we can't maintain the position. We'll have to refortify at the reserve trench." Rowan pulled a Pall Mall from his waist pocket.

"Let me get that for you." Lt. Jenkins leaned in with a flint and lit Rowan's fag, then turned the flame into his cherry-wood pipe. A few puffs of his weathered cheeks and strands of Virginian tobacco smoke wafted into the tent rafters. "RFC surveillance confirmed it this morning. The bad news is that we must hold that line, lieutenant-"

"Pardon sir, but that's suicide-"

"Tut tut-" Jenkins hushed. "The generals say if we're unable to hold our ground, it could lead to a sequence of events that'd have us fighting at the outskirts of Paris by spring. That's the bad news. The good news is they've scrambled a pals battalion of new volunteers waiting in the bull ring -solid lads from Dumfries- ready to lay it on the line for Britannia." Jenkins smirked, unsure if his enthusiastic bluster would lift Rowan's spirits.

"Scotsman?"

"Aye. Your neck of the woods."

"Creetown, my father worked as a powder monkey there in the granite quarries."

"A powder monkey?"

"They surveyed veins of stone, looking for faults and exploitable natural cuts. The monkey would find a line, tap it out with tri-nitro-

toluene, then give her a set of timed blasts to knock the slab free. Hell of thing. So loud it made your eyes water." Rowan stared off, wistful.

"Explosives used for something other than tearing young men apart... how quaint," Jenkins joked.

"Aye," Rowan replied, preoccupied.

Confusion overtook him, resolving into a moment of clarity like a series of chess moves leading to an indefensible checkmate. A crazed smile erased his scowl leaving Jenkins nervous he may've another crackpot lieutenant in his ranks.

"You all right, Lt. Guthrie?"

"Fine, sir. Just thinking... artillery?"

"We've moved a few pieces up from the reserve. You should have a solid battery ready."

"Time to inspect the new Tommies I suppose."

"Cpl. Smith will show you to the Bull Ring. Best of luck, lieutenant."

"Sir." With a look of desperate optimism, Rowan saluted then shook Jenkins' calloused hand.

#

The new volunteers were nothing but boys, barely men by the look of their doughy whiskerless faces. Their Enfields were as tall as they stood. Uniforms hung from slender frames like a burlap sack on a scarecrow, their oversized Brody helmets teetering askew on narrow boyish heads. Nothing fit and their boots were oversized, a recipe for trench foot. All in all, it was a sobering sight.

Master Sgt. Wallace's grimace gave Rowan a genuine unease. The brass was scraping the bottom of the army's war chest for enough gear to saddle the new Tommies. The Great War had drug on too long and it was beyond Rowan's comprehension as to

why Britannia was selling off her progeny for such futile misery.

"How many we got master sergeant?" he asked, peering through the ranks as he surveyed the formation.

"From the manifest... around twelve hundred. Although, you'd be hard pressed to squeeze a whole man out of the lot."

"Sgt. Wallace, they'll be none of that kind of talk around the lads. We're facing a Hun horde some five thousand strong, and these young blokes are all that's left to stave off our most certain demise... them and less than a hundred old sweats."

Wallace's grizzled face turned sullen. The brief humor at the expense of the motley recruits had embarrassed him. Rowan was keenly aware that the morale of the nervous regiment was hanging by a thread. Just a brief look at the frontline and these lads knew good and well what lay ahead.

"Sir, their drill instructor told them you'd have some words," Sgt. Wallace said, taking a few steps away from the lieutenant.

Rowan looked past the bobbing heads towards the plumes of smoke and churned earth spiraling up from the horizon. The Germans were beginning their softening barrage in earnest.

"Alright you lot! Full attention!" Wallace shouted.

"Men." Rowan paced the restless line of boy soldiers. "I'll be frank as I'd expect the same from my commanding officer. We're facing an overwhelming Bosch push scant days away. You'll be making up the majority of my recently decimated 242nd. The odds are against us. We're looking down the barrel of roughly five thousand reasonably encouraged Alleymen. It's going to be a real Black

Hand Gang operation. If I had it any other way, I wouldn't subject you lot to such duty right away. But his war's gone on too long and as you know, ole Britannia is runnin' low on the Tommies. So here you stand." Rowan paused and surveyed the line. He'd no stomach for easing fret; the first bone rattling shell would erase any speech-inspired bravado.

"I know you're missing home," Rowan continued. "And thinkin' about sweethearts and mums, and how they're the only ones who care about you in this cruel harsh world, and how you may not see them again... and lads, I hate to tell you, a few of you'd be right-"

"-Sir!" Sergeant Wallace interrupted, his push-broom moustache quivering above pursed lips. "Don't let the Lt. Major hear you getting' all weepy with the lads, or-"

"-Or what?"

"Nothing, sir. Forgive me," the sergeant apologized then stepped back.

Rowan continued. "Those back home aren't the only ones praying for you here on the Front. You don't know me from Adam, but I'm pulling for you just as much as anyone. Because if you fail, your sweethearts may weep, but it's the bloke standing next to you that'll face the consequences. I've as much at stake insuring you keep breathing this smog-rotten air as anyone. Your loved ones may be praying for your safety, but I'm the only person on God's good Earth that's capable of answering those prayers. So you listen up! You'll follow every order I give without grumble. You'll listen and obey all your regimental officers, and you'll carry out your duties without a quiver. If you follow orders, you will get through this. I bet my

life on it. Despite the rumors from the bull rings, the sun's not set on the 242nd. We'll be victorious lads because we've no other choice. Discipline, without it you will perish."

Rowan glowered at the young men. It was hard to tell if they understood. Fear had a strange way of obscuring confidence, but fear gave a man wherewithal. And for the young Tommies, they were going to need every lick.

#

Lt. Peters leaned his chair against the muddy wallboards of Lt. Captain Guthrie's dugout, smoking the stale tobacco of his last cigarette. The pistol lay on his lap as he slowly pushed it back and forth across the damp wool of his britches, feeling the cold weight against his leg. There were five rounds buried in the clip ready to complete the mission for which they were designed. It wouldn't take but an instant. One quick moment and the worries and sorrow would all vanish.

He looked up at the two officers crowded around the map table haloed by a soft cone of light. All were engrossed in the planning of the 242nd's last stand. And the last stand was what it would be, rumor had it. How fast could he snap the pistol up to his forehead? Could Lt. Guthrie and the other regimental officer tackle him in time? Maybe he would panic and shoot one of them instead. Then what would they say about him?

"Peters!" Rowan roared.

"Yes Sir!" Peters blurted, the dark thoughts of the past minutes fading.

"Stop lollygagging and fetch my magnifying glass!"

"Of course," Peters snapped.

Rowan focused on the grainy RFC photographs, connecting the small circular craters of No Man's Land, schisms through the isthmus dividing the front in two. He traced the line like a child's finger painting. Squinting, he foresaw an imaginary sap running out from his trench and breaching the Hun frontline. It was too late to begin mine work to deepen a ditch. It was going to take something quicker and more efficient.

"How many Bangalores we got laying around, Lt. Simon?"

"I believe I had some of the new Tommies load up the reserve caissons with a reasonable lot. If I were to make a guess, I'd say three to four hundred yards of pipe and a good dozen charges. Pardon my ignorance but what do you have in mind?" Lt. Simon was confused.

"My father was a powder monkey in Dumfries. He used to look for granite fissures he could load with charge to make use of a rock's natural cuts," Rowan explained, hovering over the field photos. "You see, Lt. Simon, if we connect those Bertha craters with the Bangalore pipes and detonate them, we can make ourselves a sap network right to the Hun's doorstep. When the glut of those Bosch bastards comes running over the top, we charge through the protection of the kluged trench, letting loose enfilade along the way. Put a couple of Vickers squads near the front and mow down the second wave while they're busy smoking coffin-nails on the firestep." Rowan stared on with saucer-sized eyes, his trembling hands betraying any cold calculating calm.

"A counter-offensive with a just a handful of boys? What kind of trench is this going to be -no duckboards, sandbags or parapets? It'll be just a

wet shallow stinking ditch. Hardly any cover at all. The slop of a whole regiment running single-file-like, snaking up to the Hun lines... -It'll be a mess! If one of those lads trips, the push will stall, and we'll be sitting ducks. Case-shot will make mincemeat of our arses. It's damn dodgy!" Lt. Simon argued.

When rehashed in such a way Rowan too felt resigned to playing devil's advocate. With his excitement waning, he pulled a fresh pack of Pall Mall's from this front pocket and struck the flint. Smoke burst from his lungs, the haze dimming the squalid dugout's lamplight.

"The glass, sir."

Peters handed the concave lens to Rowan. Rowan saw the sweat glisten off the lieutenant's slimy palms. His face was dour, cold, and resigned. He stared shiftless from eyes heavy with the black hollow rings of exhaustion.

"Peters, what's gotten into you?" Rowan asked.

It was apparent that Lt. Peters was shaken. Silence filled the air interrupted only by the distant spit of a Vickers.

"Answer your commanding officer!" Rowan yelled.

"It's just that -I don't mean to speak for the men, sir-"

"-Then speak for yourself, man!" Rowan roared.

"I've been hearing rumblings amongst the lads -a general lack of will, all hopeless and full of grievances, spreading like contagion."

"Have you heard anything of this, Lt. Simon?" Rowan asked.

"No Sir. Although in my haste, I haven't had time to listen to grievances."

"That makes two of us," Rowan said, incensed.

Rowan turned to the quivering Peters. Anger seized him as he grabbed the officer's tattered lapel to pull him close. Peters' forlorn eyes focused in on Rowan's fiery glare. It was an anger fueled by contempt. He wanted to punish Peters, try him for treason, and let the brass make an example out of him.

"I don't understand, lieutenant!" Peters whimpered, a deep swallow seizing his throat, "It's just -sir, everyone thinks it's impossible. All the men have been writing letters home saying this is it, that this is the end!" Rowan relaxed his grip and stepped back. He was well aware that it was not just the men Peters was speaking for but Peters himself.

"Listen up, the both of you," Rowan said calmly, taking another drag from his Pall Mall. "As my senior officers you're allowed your doubts, but this is a dire situation. You must not treat these men as fodder, nor must you give them false illusions that Britannia will treat them as heroes if we're victorious. There're no heroes in this bloody war." He flicked the remains of his burnt cigarette to the ground. "Treat them as you would frightened children, with fostered respect. We're all in this together, all of us. This war will not stop to attend to our dismal circumstance. We are out-manned, out-gunned, out-experienced, and on edge. This plan is our only canteen in this parched endless desert." Rowan pointed at the cluttered map table. "It's not the lifeboat we're desperate for, but it's all we got. Understood?"

A quiet took the dugout save the distant thuds of artillery and dirt clods falling from the water-soaked planks above. Rowan looked around, nothing but the downcast gaze of solemn men. Rowan

had played his last card. If they weren't going to pick up the plan and run with it, then he'd no hope left to dispense.

Peters snapped suddenly and stiffly saluted. "Understood, lieutenant captain!"

"Sir!" Simon followed. "Now let's have a look at your plan again."

Rowan's mouth gaped in astonishment. It was the first time in a long while he'd a sense of relief. The clammy sweat on his neck quickly evaporated. His words had managed to pacify the regiment's unruly elements. His men just wanted someone to look after them. God was distant but Rowan was close. He sighed and moved back into the light of the dangling kerosene lamp.

"When our registers spot the first wave of Huns, that's when we detonate the Bangalores and knock through the Bertha craters in sequence. It'll be a traverse and muddy as hell. But from the reconnaissance photos, I reckon the longest stretch we'll have to penetrate is about fifteen yards. May get dicey, especially breaching the Hun saps. I want the communications trench widened so we can line up the Tommies two abreast back from the breach. It'll make it easier to get a full run. Like Simon said, we'll have to be spaced accordingly. If they bunch and one lad falls they'll all go down like dominoes. It'll be bullocks for the whole bleeding lot. I want the men in full battle order with respirators. Once the regiment's through the breech and the Hun's start piling into our empty trenches, the reserve batteries will fire the White Star into our forward lines--"

"-Gas our own lines?" Simon scoffed.

"We won't be there, lieutenant. It's a ruse, a deception. What will matter is those Alleymen won't be wearing their respirators-"

"I see, sir. Bit of nastiness that is."

"I want a set of old sweat machine gunners with me in the lead-"

"You'll be point?" Peters said surprised.

"Yes Peters, along with Master Sgt. Wallace."

"It's just that -That might seem a bit familiar to the lads, the Richards' incident and all-"

"Am I mad with fever, Lt. Peters?-"

"-No Sir-"

"-Then look into my eye. If you tell the men anything tonight you'll tell them this, I am bloody well not Lt. Richards."

"It's just that he went stone-cold-crazy halfway into the push and started cutting at himself with his own bleeding bayonet. Some said he even popped an eye out... grizzly business that. Made the surviving lot weary of such... -Well looks are deceiving I reckon. Don't want 'em seeing bravado as foolhardy. That's all."

"Peters, do you think Sgt. Wallace would follow a fool into battle?"

"No sir, not at all."

"Then I'd trust in Sgt. Wallace's assessment of the situation, if you've doubts. Lets not talk anymore of the tragedy that was Lt. Richards, shall we?"

"No, of course not, sir."

[TD] CHAPTER THREE

Rowan sat huddled in the corner, clutching Anna's ring. He'd been there for hours, maybe days. The soveaske fluid allowed him sleep, but it wasn't restful or natural. It eased the madness of the hydrokraft and tamed the tartness with dizzying calm. This had become his post-mortem regiment, a surrogate for the daily cycles of eating and sleeping, life reduced to stimulants and opiates.

He realized what was missing from the hosloft. There was none of the amenities he'd grown accustomed to in life, no kitchen or toilet, the small luxuries enjoyed by the living. Bizarre sensation overwhelmed him. Memories of the past drifted idly through his gray matter, the milestones of his life far removed as if they were someone else's.

I'm a mourner at my own funeral, Rowan thought, something he'd say to the regiment in the war's dark days. But now, the words hit home with an amplified literal morbidity. He held the diamond to the window light. It looked as unblemished as the day his uncle had cut it. The gems geological time was the young bride to the spinster of humanity's brief flash, undaunted by the eons.

"Survive," he muttered, hypnotized.

The door of the hosloft slid open. She walked in and quickly sat the carafes of soveaske and hydrokraft down on the table, picking up the empties and placing them on a tray in the process. Her movements were jilted and awkward. Every effort was pained to avoid making eye contact. He

felt like a closet door hiding a child's imaginary monster. He'd guessed her name was Ragna, although she'd never introduced herself.

"More light would be nice," she said nervously.

She touched a hidden panel in the wall and tapped a series of buttons. The opaque frost of the mammoth window dissipated like breath from a mirror. The ethereal shadows he'd grown accustomed to were in fact strange buildings. Beyond the threshold was a skyline of shiny cathedrals, lofty steeples spiraling through the clouds into a ceiling of gray. They were natural and organic like limestone stalagmites defying gravity. Rowan stood for a better look.

"Too bright?" Ragna said.

She again fiddled with the panel and adjusted the tint of the window. Rowan walked up and touched the glass. He'd never seen buildings so tall. The atmosphere was thick, giving the city an awesome depth. More seabirds spiraled in flocks around the towers' black sheen. There were so many. The seashore was close but the miasma below obscured the shoreline beyond.

Ragna had quietly left the room. He'd been too taken with the view to notice. She'd left behind fresh fluids. Dazzled by the bustle of Ny Midgard's ebb and flow, he grew faint as the vigor left his body. He was in need of the energy and poured a small glass then sat down on the edge of the to sip it.

Dusk had encroached on the vertical metropolis. Like stars sparking to life, the buildings twinkled with a chorus of light. Rowan took a few more sips and looked past the forest of lanky structure towards the pink of the mountains beyond. Glacier encrusted peaks encircled the

eastern horizon giving way to an expansive western ocean. Thousands of feet below, the bustling streets teemed with a rainbow of motorized traffic and people.

Everything was silent. There was motion without noise. Rowan felt like a child lording over an anthill, watching the commotion of miniature life. He'd been to the top of the Eiffel Tower on leave, but this was something new. The humanity below was foreign and alien.

The night slipped by as he tirelessly observed the city, a welcoming relief from crippling introspection. A glow in the east announced a new dawn. He turned to look at the clock. Twelve hours had passed. Death had jilted his sense of time as hours disassociated from a once finite life, seconds evaporating into indecipherable metrics.

"You must drink the soveaske," Ragna said. He noticed she'd re-entered the room. It was the first time she'd spoken to him.

"What's this city?" Rowan asked. She approached cautiously. The dawn caught her in a light he wasn't expecting. She was beautifully exotic.

Unlike Sverre or Sigurd, Ragna had no tribal tattoos. Her skin was light and soft, different than Ny Æsiri men. She'd beautiful hair -long black and glowing with health. Rowan guessed she was in her mid-twenties. There was an innocent naiveté about her, something he'd found endearing in Anna.

"You're in Ny Midgard. The sea beyond is the Stillehavet, the largest of the open-water oceans-"

"Open-water... I don't understand."

She shrugged, confused.

"What about the mountains?"

"They say the land of ice to the east was once occupied by giants. Colonists called it 'the land of the big feet' -Papagon- the Ny Æsiri call it Jotenheim." Ragna motioned to the distant glacial wall. "No one lives there now. The ice is too thick and too high. Here along the Stillehavet, we're kept warm by the volcanoes deep below the ocean. We call it Ægir's Hearth."

"Here in Midgard, eh?" Rowan started to put the geographical pieces of the puzzle together. He recalled from the previous night, the faint glimmer of the Southern Cross. The sun had set over the ocean to the west -likely the Pacific- with the vast mountain range to the east -likely the Andes.

"South America," Rowan whispered.

"America?"

"The continent?"

"I don't understand. This is Ny Midgard."

Ragna was confused. He'd never been to the far-flung lands of the Americas but recalled Anna's fascination with world travel. She spent hours planning exotic honeymoons Rowan could never afford. But she'd carry on regardless, almost in spite of his financial inadequacies -endlessly filling his ears with trivia from the National Geographic magazine, rambling on about the Amazonian tribes of the Xingu River or the recently discovered Inca ruins of Machu Picchu. Perhaps she'd arranged it. Perhaps she'd visited the very place where Rowan so mysteriously found himself now.

"There's a gathering along the promenade below. I've been watching it most of the night. What is it?" Rowan pointed. Ragna approached cautiously, one eye on Rowan, the other on the window.

"It's the Hall of Con Tiqui Viracocha. The ancients called him, Ymir, the life giver, creator of the pantheon. It's a weeklong celebration to honor him."

The thousand years that'd passed gave the Æsiri people a new religion -a neo-paganism whose origins were impossible to conceptualize. The gray muck in his skull lacked the necessary imagination. He looked down on the temple below nestled among Midgard's many towers.

The hall of Viracocha was an edifice of multistoried gables resembling Scandinavia's medieval wooden churches. Pilgrims gathered by the thousands around the structure. Greeting them was the colossal statue of Viracocha, an ancient Norse giant wearing a suit of primeval armor and an ornate helm. His features were not Æsiri but European -a Caucasian with wide fiery eyes, a stout nose, and thick braided beard. Rowan recognized the idol. It was the face that'd greeted him from the Skikk chamber. Now the god had a name. The distance from Skjærsild's towering vantage was too great. Rowan had to get closer.

"Can you take me to the celebration?" Rowan asked.

She grew anxious; he'd gotten too close. She quickly stepped away, maintaining her distance. Her forced friendliness had evaporated. He'd forgotten himself and crossed an unseen boundary. Rowan was dysterfolk undead, and Ragna was very much alive. A fact amplified by the awkward silence.

"I'll see what can be done," She said at last.

#

Sigurd arranged a security contingent for their excursion outside Skjærsild. Much to Rowan's

surprise, his request was immediately granted with an ease he'd not expected. The nature of the current arrangement was still a mystery, but Sverre and his managing officers were eager to accommodate Rowan's curiosity. He no longer felt a prisoner.

The main entryway of Skjærsild was quiet, like a mausoleum. A white vaulted ceiling converged on an enormous glass entryway near where the entourage had gathered. Accompanying Sverre was Ragna and Sigurd along with a cadre of heavily armed soldiers. Like Sigurd, the soldiers wore dark spectacles and were ornately tattooed. Rowan gathered the skin art was a military ranking system similar to the chevrons of British insignias. Their heavy rifles were unique. Like so much of Midgard they too had an organic and broad shape, difficult to tell butt from barrel.

Sverre led everyone through the entryway and out to an elevated train platform. Ragna was bundled up in a large winter parka, her breath turning to frost in the cold Midgard air. He felt nothing but numbness. Temperature was an abstraction. His body was impervious to heat or cold.

"What do you think, Herr Guthrie?" Sverre asked. Rowan looked skyward. Skjærsild's ominous façade stood out against Ny Midgard's skyline. Nothing was visible from outside -no windows or balconies, only a solid wall of onyx-glass. The city street overflowed with Ny Æsiri. Rowan found it confusing and disorienting. Buildings, people and vehicles merged in and out of each other making it difficult to tell motion from static. Harsh lights flashed movies over enormous marquees -scrambled symbols and images warped into abstract versions of a human landscape all whirling around in a

panicked mania. Rowan's eyes were too numb and slow to keep pace.

"Is it like this all the time?" Rowan asked, bewildered.

"The Ny Æsiri are ambitious. We're Viracocha's chosen people, the last civilization and the inheritors of a perilous world. We're industrious because we can't afford not to be," Sverre said.

A top-heavy train drifted into the station. It hovered a few feet above thin tracks as blue sparks crackled from guide feelers dangling below its slick carapace. The doors slid open and everyone stepped inside. The car was half-filled with curious travelers peering around narrow seatbacks straining to catch a glimpse. As they sat, it was immediately obvious Rowan was an oddity.

"How many dysterfolk are there in the city?" Rowan asked.

"In Ny Midgard the dysterfolk are rare. Most of them depart immediately after Skikk, never to be seen by the Ny Æsiri again."

"Where do they go?" Rowan asked.

The question piqued Sigurd's interest. He turned and looked at Sverre, saying nothing.

Rowan repeated the question. The train pulled away from the station. Sverre pursed his lips and paused.

"They travel over Bifrost to Asgard and Valhalla," Sverre said, finally.

"Valhalla?" Rowan asked, confused.

"Nothing to concern yourself with at the moment, Herr Guthrie. It all will become clear in time," Sigurd replied.

Rowan remained silent as the train drifted effortlessly over the crowded streets. Passengers

continued to gaze at him. With vacant eyes, Rowan stared back. They were a handsome people dressed in functional stylish clothing embellished with soft furs and exotic fabrics. They looked like any other train passengers, some with families on everyday errands, others most likely bound for the religious event.

Sigurd and the soldiers sat silently and surveyed the car, watching every twitch and cough. There was unease. Skjærsild was exercising a strange vigilance. Rowan was valuable to them in ways he couldn't fathom.

The train slowed to a halt and unloaded. Descending the steps from the platform, he noticed the Hall of Viracocha. People crowded into a large open space, chanting and filling the air with rhythmic drumbeats. Torches wavered in the cold air as a slow procession of half-dressed men marched towards the great hall. Rowan and the entourage ambled through an opening in the crowd.

The ground was covered with frozen droplets of blood smeared by shuffling feet. Close to them was a parade of self-flagellating pilgrims marching lockstep towards the ominous colossus of Viracocha. Each step provoked a flailing of razor-laced chains across their legs and chest.

Rowan gathered these were the holy men of Midgard. They were shaved bald, leaving nothing but a rim of ornamental hair to crown their intricately tattooed head. Bare bodies were welted with wounds that steamed with sweat. After labored steps, they dropped their whips and prostrated themselves, chanting inaudible prayers, intoxicated by the ritual. The process was step-repeated in a torturous zealous exercise.

"What're they doing?" he asked, shocked.

"Punishing themselves for the betrayal of Con Tiqui Viracocha. It is said that after he created the gods, his creations rebelled. Odin killed Viracocha, and from his remains the lands of fire and ice were created. Then the gods exiled him to the western ocean. His sacrifice to his people has never been forgotten and neither was their betrayal. They're honoring him and begging mercy for their ancestor's sins," Ragna explained. She was distant and did not look at him.

Rowan took in the spectacle.

The immediate crowd noticed Rowan, the peculiar dysterfolk in their midst. They backed away as the self-flagellating monks turned and bowed with a quiet reverence. There was a submissive look in their eyes as their heads nodded in prayer.

"They believe you're a sign!" Sverre exclaimed.

"I don't understand."

"The Edda says that during crisis, Viracocha will send his warrior angels, the Suncasapa. It's a sign of his imminent return. Your presence in Ny Midgard is known. You are one of Viracocha's chosen," Sverre said.

Rowan felt ambushed. No longer a curious observer, he was a fixture of religious fervor -a centerpiece for their heathen idolatry. It was something he wanted no part of. Sverre pointed towards the enormous statue. Rowan carefully studied it and grew keenly aware of his likeness to the idol and its overt Caucasian features. He was perhaps the only European relic the Ny Æsiri people had ever laid eyes on. Somehow to them, he represented a missing cog in the machinery of some arcane prophecy.

"I'm not some angelic paladin. I don't want any part of this. Leave me alone!" Rowan pleaded.

The attention was too much. His mind was jostled by queer anxious thoughts. He knew nothing of the Æsiri's prophecies or religious maxims. Of all the revelations death had brought, the necessity for religion was the most artificial. The idea loosened his sanity. Panicked, he had to escape it. Leaving his escorts behind, he bolted through the crowd and away from the hectic festival.

Lethargic at first, his legs quickly adapted to a focused nimbleness. His body was evolving in ways that surprised him. Dashing through the crowd, he wasn't sure where he was going; he only knew that he needed to put as much distance between him and the ritual as possible.

"Herr Guthrie, for your own good. Stop!" Sverre yelled.

Rowan didn't turn but kept running. Everything was a blur as he sprinted into Ny Midgard's fluid maze of lights and people. He found himself wandering an open market, the cuisine of Midgard on full display.

Pressurized tanks held luminescent sea creatures, exotic fair dredged from the ocean's abyss. People sliced meat skewers from rotisseries of roasting sea mammals, draping their meals with swaths of seaweed and eelgrass. Rowan thankfully, could smell nothing. The reek of sea life must have permeated everything. Crabs and coiled shells filled cages as dark boiling cauldrons simmered on white-hot flame. He passed kelp hung on low racks, cooled by networks of misting machines as Æsiri merchants bartered with their raucous customers.

"Herr Guthrie!" Sverre hollered.

Rowan looked back and saw the bouncing heads of the Skjærsild security men gaining on him. Like a cornered animal, he was frightened and overcome by

instinct. He ducked into a dimly lit café hoping the pale lights would hide his necrotic peculiarities. No one seemed to notice, too busy consuming decorative dishes of tentacle oddities.

"Can I get you something?" a servant asked. "The bobtails are especially good today."

"No thank you," Rowan said as he wove his way towards the back. He'd nowhere to hide. They'd dressed him in the black jumpsuits of the Skjærsild giving him a shadowy camouflage. Unfortunately his gaunt pallor stuck out mime-like among the swarthy complexions. Ny Midgard was far too foreign for him to meld away.

There was commotion outside. He glanced over and noticed Sigurd and his men poking around the entrance like wolves sniffing the air. They walked in and talked to the proprietor. Rowan tried to duck but a quick nod and a pointed finger gave him away. Fearful, he slipped out through the café's backdoor and sprinted through a crate-filled alleyway.

"Herr Guthrie, stop!" Sigurd hollered, his voice deep and booming. "It's not safe!"

Safety meant nothing to a dead man, Rowan thought. He continued his frantic flight, his mind numbed with a firestorm of illogic. The market emptied into a paddock -a holding pen filled with a disheveled lot waiting to pass through a gate. They weren't prisoners, but their clothes were drab and utilitarian, worn from hard work and neglect. Ny Æsiri soldiers stood guard around a perimeter. A few manned guns atop broad armored vehicles that appeared to float above the ground.

"Separate him from the day workers. I don't want him getting close to the Mindre!" Sigurd yelled.

Sigurd's men fanned out, loading large bulbous cartridges into muzzle of their rifles. The soldiers retrained their weapons and yelled commands at the crowd of frightened laborers. Massive mechanical doors hissed closed, sealing the polished bustle of Ny Midgard from the darkness beyond.

"Get them down! Secure the Bmur!" Sigurd shouted to the wall guards. Rowan dove into the raggedy crowd, their faces fearful as they kneeled to the ground.

"Release!"

The men fired their cartridges -hollow thumps. The canisters detonated, a few exploding into the crowd around him. The disheveled workers screamed as they tried to escape the thick yellow fog that'd dispersed. Rowan's movements slowed and grew unresponsive. Collapsing, he felt cold bodies shivering underneath. Some struggled while others grew hypothermic and ceased moving altogether.

Rowan was frozen but still managed to move his eyes. He watched the soldiers approach. A few pulled him free of the pile, tossing aside the frigid half-dead and dying laborers like cordwood, their gurgled pleas going unanswered. His body was paralyzed, but his mind was aware. Calm returned as the men hauled him away. The animal instinct to flee grew distant.

"You were lucky," Sigurd said, standing over Rowan with steely eyes. "The Vanir have clandestine assassins everywhere." Sigurd stood up and surveyed the cowering laborers. "They use terror to weaken us. They'd love nothing better than to destroy Ny Æsiri dysterfolk."

Sigurd gave Rowan a pat on his shoulder as his men picked him up and loaded him into a nearby

security vehicle. The gates reopened and the remnants of the distraught underclass funneled outside into the dark squalor beyond.

#

Columns of black smoke rose from the periphery of the low-lying sprawl, filling the glacial valley with a dirty glow. Rowan peered through the murk looking for the glowing flames, but the fires were too distant. Concrete slums obscured the dense horizon. Phosphorescent flashes of aerial flairs flickered over tenement rooftops creating a visual pandemonium.

"Ytter-Midgard."

The running battles were distant and abstract - too remote for Rowan to appreciate the visceral mayhem. A thousand years gone and men still found excuses to fight one another. It was disheartening.

"The Æsiri are under siege," Sverre said as they continued to walk the Bmur, the name given to Ny Midgard's outer wall. "We have enemies and they're closing in on Ny Midgard."

"Who are they?" The Ny Æsiri's strength and prowess seemed uncontested.

"The Vanir." Sverre said. "Fimbulwinter is upon us, the epic ice age before the Ragnarok conflagration, the final battle. The ice covers most of the Earth now. What's left is contentious. It's possible that in a hundred years Ny Midgard will be trapped under ice. Our enemies are illusive. The Vanir hide in shadow -nomadic and parasitic, they live off the byproducts of Ny Æsiri culture. They're resourceful and cunning, and they despise our success."

Rowan was unsure.

He struggled to see how he fit into this new human wilderness. There was a role Sverre and Sigurd wanted him to play, but what it was specifically, seemed muddled. He found himself with no easy options, none that made any sense at least. His life was gone but something deep down - unresolved and nebulous- wanted another shot at it. He felt an urge to feign the living and squeeze redemption from this shadowy limbo, but his mind was rusty and too anemic to sort it all out at the moment. He just needed to roll with the punches and see where this path led; it was all he could do.

He looked down on the dilapidated and crowded streets below, a distant world from the brightly lit towers of Ny Midgard behind him.

"And what of them?"

"The Mindre Æsiri?" Sverre asked. "They're our charge, our protectorate in Midgard. We provide them security, and they provide us with the resources necessary to insure that security."

Rowan remembered the laborers from the cordon.

"But you're the same."

Sverre laughed. "Herr Guthrie, the Mindre are not the Ny Æsiri. We're the direct ancestors of Con Tiqui Viracocha, the chosen inheritors of Earth. We carry the blood of Odin-Allfather and Frigga in our veins. The Mindre Æsiri are our children, and we ensure their welfare. Without them we cannot survive, and without us they cannot survive."

"Symbiotic but feudal," Rowan said. "It looks like they're taking the brunt of it."

Much of the outer city was rife with an industrial decay -empty, unlit, walls missing and pocked with the scars of urban war. It reminded

him of the shelled out husks left along the Siegfried line, a dystopic counterpart to Ny Midgard's utopia.

"We have to be vigilant. The Ytter-Midgard legions patrol the outer-Bmur relentlessly, but the Vanir hold the Mindre hostage making our job difficult. They're chameleons, lethal and savage." Sverre reached out to Rowan's shoulder. "You frightened us the other night at the gate. Too close to a Vanir suicide-assassin and they'd have destroyed you. We use the dichloric-phenohol gas as a mechanism of restraint. It provides us a margin of safety. Occasionally post-Skikk trauma provokes unpredictable behavior."

"-A chemical leash."

"Not exactly," Sverre chuckled awkwardly. "Phenohol has other uses. You'll see. I apologize about your episode near the gate."

"Not sure why I bolted and ran, just felt shell-shocked, so much attention and all those eyes on me. This body doesn't feel like my own. It's like walking in another man's shoes. It was claustrophobia maybe and this beastly urge to escape."

"-Side affects of Skikk," Sverre's eyes were focused and bright, reflecting the bedlam. "We wouldn't ask something you couldn't deliver. The senses overwhelm and animal dread seizes you. You're not alive, Herr Guthrie, but you're still human and must relearn what you once took for granted-"

"-For granted?" His body trembled. "But I don't take anything for granted -every thought and conversation, everyone I've known, and the people I loved..." His voice broke into mechanical garble, barely audible.

"-I did not mean to suggest..."

"-I've lost my life... everything. There's just nothing."

"-It's not like that-" Sverre said, trying to calm him.

Rowan sighed. "Why am I in God's name here? I feel like an urchin lurking in an opium den of nostalgia. My life's nothing but an addictive morbid curiosity. What exactly is this all about?" Rowan pleaded, gesticulating.

"Do you trust me?"

Rowan broke down. His chest heaving as he wheezed, vocal organs decomposed into hollow artificial reverberations. Words splintered into disjointed sound. He held Anna's ring tight as he leaned over the outer railing. Careful, Sverre studied him with intensity.

Sverre repeated the question. "Do you trust me, Herr Guthrie?"

"Do I have a choice?"

Sverre paused then changed the subject. "My wife and children have difficulty understanding the work I do at Skjærsild. The holy men lamented it taboo but gradually they accepted it as the will of the gods. And now dysterfolk are heroes to the Ny Æsir. I know my work gives us hope and gives immortality to our civilization. Our enemies can never take that from us. I do it for my wife and children. This isn't about you or me; it's about mankind. You're confused now, but it will make sense. Trust me."

Rowan composed himself and walked up to one of the wall watchtowers. Behind dilated slits, the Midgard legionnaires manned bulbous weaponry, scanning the battlefield for a faceless enemy. Nothing had changed in a thousand years; the wars

of mankind continued unabated, the reasons much the same. His heart still ached though it'd ceased beating eons ago, replaced by some alien contraption. He thought of Anna.

Uncomfortable minutes passed.

He turned and looked at Sverre, "I want to go out beyond the Bmur on patrol. I want to see Ytter-Midgard for myself."

Black unblinking eyes gazed at Sverre, unsettling him. Dysterfolk were unemotional and reserved, but Rowan's relapses grew unpredictable and difficult to manage. Sverre held back.

"Sigurd will make the arrangements."

#

The boat plied the froth as the wind picked up from the southeast. It was a boiling green, foaming at the crests of the turbulent waves as currents flowed erratically over submerged landscapes. Rowan wrestled the tiller trying to work the small sloop into a tack. He struggled to trim the jib with his free hand, but the wind overpowered him. He couldn't wrestle the winch as it was.

"If you would... please, love."

He held out the water-drenched line. Anna flashed him a frustrated look as she removed a glove and daintily pulled the dripping rope.

"Where's Brighton? I haven't seen the pier in an hour. Father expects us at the Royal Albion five o'clock sharp, and you know how he loathes tardiness. I cannot fathom why I agreed to such an excursion," Anna moaned.

"Not too much longer. We're heading in now. Look for the pier."

The truth was Rowan didn't know where they were. In fact, he'd no idea. A temporary amnesia had

overtaken him. Anna was in one of her moods, and it looked as if the weather had taken a turn for the worst.

"The waves, Rowan Aidan Guthrie, they're running over!"

He abhorred it when she used his full name, reminding him of the tortuous coincidence that middle name had with the large ostracized girl of his schoolboy days. He was miserable and she knew it. Anna gave out a slight shriek. The bottom was filling with sloshing seawater, lapping at the hem of her summer dress. He remained calm as he tried to ease her fears, more difficult as the whole situation grew disconcerting.

"Just a moment. It's just the tack. The waves will be at our backs shortly."

The skies swelled heavy with nimbus clouds, casting twilight over the angry water. The sea turned from a pale green to a sickly gray, the horizon disintegrating into a heaving tumult obscuring his bearings. The wind grew stiff, accompanied by faint driven rain that portended an imminent deluge. He struggled to keep the boat on an even keel.

"Rowan?" Anna's voice was meek with fret.

He was frustrated, not knowing what to do or how to get them out of the squall; her frailty angered him. Why'd she have to resort to adolescence when things grew difficult?

"Yes Anna. I'm doing my best if you'll let me!" Rowan snapped as he wrestled with the rigging.

"Don't yell at me!"

Talking was growing impossible as the quickening wind stole every word.

"What is it? I'm trying to get us out of this!"

He couldn't recall ever seeing her so frightened. She looked like a refugee from the shelled frontlines, desperate with hollow eyes. It was as if her soul had slipped out, replaced by a ghost. It was Anna but only a fickle shadow. He managed a free hand to caress her colorless cheeks. Cold to the touch, he pulled away.

"I don't want to die, Rowan," Anna whimpered.

"Anna, we're not going to die. Just hold tight. I'll see us through."

Rowan struggled on. The boat continued to gather water around the keel boards. With one hand on the tiller, the other on the jib sheet, he fought the storm. He couldn't look at Anna. There was no need. He felt her searing doubt at his back just as strongly as the gale wind. He would make her trust him.

As the waves lifted the day sloop above the sea, he saw the fixed silhouette of the Brighton seashore. Rowan rode the ragged edge of the storm as its swells pushed the boat onward. A deep sigh escaped him, the uncertainty ebbing; the worst was behind them.

"Anna dear," he smiled, looking back, "I told you we'd..."

She was gone.

Overboard. Rowan dropped the tiller and stood to his feet, scanning the waves. Nothing. He dashed over to the stern looking for any sign of her. She couldn't have gotten far. The dim sky revealed a submerged white glove, just feet below the bubbling wake. It was her glove, the one she'd so reluctantly removed.

"Oh dear God."

He stretched his arm beneath the waves as he leaned over the unstable hull. Waving his arm

through the water, he reached for the glove, desperately hoping a petite arm or hand would be within reach. Again nothing. His mind froze with panic. Emptiness overwhelmed him crippling his mind. She'd slipped away, and he'd allowed it. He'd betrayed her.

Black fingers of a ghastly hand clutched the delicate glove from the depths. A fishlike but human face wavered just beneath. A scream escaped him. He started to hyperventilate. Horror took hold, but he could not turn away.

"What are you?" Rowan quivered, "What have you done with my Anna?"

He gasped a desperate cry.

Like a drowned spirit from the abyss, a pale face looked up at him with dark pupil-less eyes. It mocked him, miming his revulsion with fishlike simplicity. His mouth gaped -it gaped. He grimaced -it grimaced. Every movement was duplicated with a contorted precision.

"My God, it's me!"

Rowan let go. With a lurch, he fell into the boiling sea, sinking slowly as the wavering rays of sunlight receded. The cold seeped into him like leviathan tentacles pulling him into blackness. He let himself drown.

"Rowan."

A liquid voice called to him.

"Wake up," said the angel. "Wake up, Rowan."

The voice was soft and warm, stronger than heavenly light. A chord had been struck. He wanted to wash himself in the sweet breath. So he floated closer, rising through the cold water.

"I don't want to wake."

"You must."

Blurred vision resolved as he awoke from the soveaske sleep cycle. Ragna stood at the edge of the bed looking worried. It was midday. Diffuse sunlight filled the hosloft like a cathedral, gentle and amber. The marine layer had lifted revealing the vaulted pinnacles of the cityscape beyond, a sight Rowan never quite grew tired of.

"Ragna." Rowan sat up on the edge of the bed, "I didn't notice you." Her brow furrowed in confusion.

"You cried out."

"It was a nightmare... but more vivid." He examined his pale flesh.

"Dysterfolk do not dream. Tormod should've told you that." She picked up the empty soveaske carafe. "You drank too much."

"I was on a boat in the English Channel with Anna." He reached for her picture. "We were trapped in a squall."

Ragna stared in interest.

"It was different than a dream."

"Anna?"

He handed her the photograph from the nearby table. She held the thick glass and studied it, fascinated.

"She's beautiful. Her hair... it's so...."

"Blonde," Rowan interjected.

"Is it a disease?" Ragna asked as she took a seat next to him. His body remained anesthetized but he felt her warmth, like hints of life cleansing the necrotic decay.

"Blonde?" Rowan laughed. "No. Some Caucasians were known for their blonde hair. The weather and lack of sunlight weakened pigment."

"Fimbulwinter dims the sky everyday in Ny Midgard. Maybe someday I'll have blonde hair-"

"I sincerely doubt that," Rowan smiled, conscious to hide his grisly teeth. "It's something you're born with. I wouldn't change anything about you Ragna. You're beautiful. I don't believe I've met anyone quite as striking."

Ragna was uncomfortable. She stood quickly and moved away from him. Rowan felt ashamed as he realized the line between the living and dead -the Æsir and dysterfolk- had been crossed. Even though the undead were incapable of accepting physical affections, she'd grown unnerved by his proximity. He turned away and walked up to the window.

"Sigurd's waiting," she said coldly.

"Right. Ytter-Midgard."

[TD] CHAPTER FOUR

"There are twelve of them," Rowan said.

He peered through the gunner's slit. The towers loomed over the receding outer wall as the armored column of mekrigers glided past the last checkpoint. Sigurd sat across from him in the cramped compartment alongside a heavily equipped squad of the varm-soldat legionnaires. Sweat beaded on his brow.

"The subsidiaries of Ny Midgard," Sigurd said, loading a hydrokraft cell into his lung-gun. "The moguls of the Ny Æsiri people -Surtur -Skjærsild -Ægir... Their premiers form the Congress of Tyr, those responsible for the fate of the Æsiri." He pushed his helmet up and looked out. "Always visible from Ytter-Midgard, the Tyrians look after us."

Sigurd was all business, focused and aggressive. Rowan noticed his worsening complexion. His cheeks were ashen and his eyes were black and sunken leaving the impression he hadn't slept in days. Rowan looked out at a line of Mindre day-workers huddled beneath makeshift overhangs as snow accumulated at their feet, their faces blurred as they absently gazed on with a desperate anonymity.

The mekrigers picked up speed casting off a wake of blue sparks. A grainy image delivered the patrol's briefing on an overhead screen. The threat level was elevated in the district. Vanir attacks had disrupted power supplies to the Ny Æsiri logistics sikrings, and Sigurd's mekriger company was to intercept the fleeing Vanir and restore energy.

"Why's it so dark?" Rowan asked.

The crowded structures of the district's slab dwellings cast impenetrable shadows on the littered streets. Flickers of light from shattered doorways intermingled with the human shapes lurking inside. Rowan's senses may've numbed, but he could smell the fear permeating Ytter-Midgard like rot.

"Energy rationing, Surtur cycles the grid every few days to conserve power. If the central core goes dark, we can't sustain operations in Ytter-Midgard. The Vanir would accelerate their siege and make for the Bmur, massacring the Mindre along the way. It's something we can't tolerate. It's a sacrifice they accept," Sigurd explained.

"Do they?" Rowan asked, looking again at the weary faces.

"Without an energy tax, we can't protect them. There just aren't enough resources."

"But Ny Midgard's so bright. It has so much--"

"-If the Ny Æsiri can't maintain Ny Midgard, the people of Ytter-Midgard will lose their security. The Vanir will butcher them. Unbridled hate does not discriminate."

Sigurd's brow furrowed as he rubbed swollen eyes. He wiped a dribble of mucous from his nose and sat back. Rowan looked around at the varmsoldat legionnaires nodding in agreement with their kommandant. Rowan was weary. The inhabitants of Ytter-Midgard looked less like citizens of Midgard and more like refugees.

His lips were wet but lacked the familiar sweetness. He dabbed them and noticed a black fluid bubbling out his mouth. His esophageal sphincter must've loosened, allowing the condensed hydrokraft to gush into the chest exchanger. It

felt like a river flowing inside his body, a fluid whisper fluttering his eardrums.

"Does it hurt?" a curious soldier asked. All looked on, fascinated by Rowan's every twitch.

"Hurt?"

"Skikk, the process?"

Rowan jostled the tubes of the shielding's pumping system. He felt the pressure inside forcing the suit's regulator to siphon liquid back to an external storage unit. Sverre informed him it was a recent technology employed by Skjærsild. The drinkable liquid had been designed to ease the initial shock. When a dysterfolk completed Skikk, the condensed system was implemented. It had made the need to drink all but obsolete.

"It doesn't hurt like you'd think of it. But it's been a ages since I was..." pausing to look at the soldier, "like yourself." He felt uncomfortable with his celebrity. Living seemed too precious to give it up for the uncanny twilight of an undead existence.

"What's it like-"

"-That's enough, Menig Bahuus!" Sigurd coughed.

"Yes, Kdt. Asperheim."

"Leave Herr Guthrie to observe. In due time all your questions will be answered. Focus on your job, soldat." Sigurd's cold clinical manner made Rowan edgy. Odd, considering Sigurd was very much alive and Rowan completely dead. The kommandant had cashed a slice of his humanity for a steely battlefield readiness it seemed. His command was running a deficit on subordinate empathy, something Rowan had always found ill advised.

The mekrigers bristled with turrets, the gunners scanning Ytter-Midgard's narrow alleyways and dark alcoves for the enemy. Rowan wondered how the

Vanir went about fighting the formidable Ny Æsiri. They'd have to be fools to try anything short of full retreat, faced with such devastating firepower.

The men were eager, rechecking weaponry and watching the grainy labyrinth of Ytter-Midgard creep by on the forward monitors. The streets were empty now, the Mindre Æsiri vanishing with the appearance of the military convoy.

"Do you know how to use this?" Sigurd pulled a spare lung-gun from an equipment rack.

"I'm unfamiliar."

Sigurd handed him the rifle. It was large and awkward but fit comfortably in the crook of his arm.

"Your hydrokraft shielding coupler hasn't been integrated yet. You'll have to load the cartridges by hand." He slid a storage cell into the butt of the weapon. "When you train it on a target, the weapon 'talks' to you and guides the volley-"

"Talks?"

"In a way. It knows your target and steadies your hand. This one hasn't been dysterfolk-tuned, but you'll manage if we should..." Sigurd fell into a coughing fit, "-become compromised."

The mekriger slowed. There were inaudible voices outside. Something was happening. The monitor hiccupped with pings and flashes. The forward unit fired at targets ahead clearing the way for the convoy's twisting procession.

"An ambush?" Rowan asked. The soldiers adjusted themselves, readying for combat.

"I don't know." Sigurd studied the situation from monitor. "Vanir have been spotted in one of the buildings ahead. We're slowing to assess the situation-"

An explosion washed over the monitor screen, knocking out the mekriger's forward cameras. The turrets unleashed a barrage, inundating the small crew compartment with squishy thunder. Rowan had never heard explosions like it. So used to the machinegun chatter of trench combat, this sounded altogether foreign.

"Hold on!" someone yelled.

With a lurch, the mekriger crashed to the ground; its suspension cushion destroyed. The vehicle's bulk skidded into the narrow snow-covered street and stopped. Smoke and fire erupted from the undercarriage unleashing a chorus of snaps and pops. The men struggled to unclasp their harnesses and ready themselves. Sigurd released the rear hatch and lowered a ramp.

"They blew out the levitation grid!"

"Stick close to the squad, Herr Guthrie. We are compromised," Sigurd ordered.

The legionnaires scrambled out and flanked the disabled mekriger, snowflakes hissing on its cooling shredded metal. Lung-guns chortled to life with heavy wet cracks. Fumbling, Sigurd pulled Rowan from his seat as smoke inundated the crew compartment. They stumbled into an empty building. A hail of Vanir and Æsiri fire ricocheted up and down the narrow thoroughfare, crowding the night like tiny meteors.

"Stay down! Watch for the suppressing fire."

Sigurd darted back out into the street. The squad was scattered -some prone -others taking cover near the mekriger's crumpled skirt. The vehicle's husk had come to rest in a smoking depression, a mess of torn latticework tangled like frayed sheep wire.

Rowan held his hand out looking for a quiver. There was no stressed physiology, no heartbeat, sweat or panic. He was an automaton now, conditioned and desensitized to the battle waging just a few feet away. Curious, he peered around the edge of the doorway to have a look.

Hollow blasts shook the ground, the rear mekriger unleashing cannon fire in support of the advancing squads. Legionnaires tore into a corner tower. Rowan was intrigued as he watched balconies disintegrate under the sustained bombardment. The Æsiri weaponry splattered its molten residue over the building façade, leaving behind an incendiary blue fire that melted the structure underneath. It burned everything it touched, reducing the crumpled wreckage to ghostly inferno. Sigurd ordered the varm-soldat to hold fire and advance.

"Over there!" a soldier yelled.

On cue, lung-guns tore into a rogue Vanir fleeing the shadows. With sanctuary denied, the enemy was reduced to cinders as he stumbled into the street. There was nothing left -no blood or bone- just a pile of goop engulfed in sapphire flame. Rowan inspected the lung-gun's unassuming organic curves finding it hard to believe such a rifle could pack such caliber. It was a far cry from the Vickers of the Great War.

"All clear!" another soldier hollered.

Sigurd approached. "It was a remotely detonated a road-mine. The Vanir waited for the column to pass and then knocked out the levitation grid. It dropped the mekriger to the ground. We haven't figured out how to counter that nastiness yet." Another cough blasted from his lungs.

"Sir, we've a casualty."

"Who?" Sigurd asked, walking over.

"Menig Bahuus, hit him in the neck. Moderate damage, just enough to knock him dead."

"Let's have a look."

The man was certainly dead -a cauterized flesh wound slicing through the side of his neck just under the ear, a bizarre lesion full of heat. A combat technician moved in to pull a data cartridge from his shielding.

"Interfacing..." The technician loaded the soldier's damage assessment into a handheld monitor. "Coroner statistics look viable. The Vanir shot was close but the synapses remain intact. He should be good."

Rowan crouched for a better look. The body was splayed like a rag doll, coagulated blood staining the snow underneath. Beads of dissolved snowflakes clung to his face while the menig's absent eyes stared into space. He wanted to feel something for the fallen varm-soldat, remorse for the poor bastard he'd spoken to only a few minutes before. Time warped and folded into undifferentiated continuum, bridging the past with the present. He remembered the God-awful dread and helplessness of seeing Tommies ripped apart on the Front, but now... there was nothing but death.

The men loaded the remains of Menig Bahuus onto a thin stretcher and walked over to an awaiting mekriger. A shallow drawer opened near the armored skirt. Cryogenic gasses seeped out as the men sat him inside.

"A few more moments, sir. I need to engage the svartblod primers." The technician fed intravenous tubes into the man's cooling flesh. Small lights flashed from an inside panel as black fluids rushed up from unseen reservoirs. "He should be ready for Skikk."

Rowan stood back. The process was quick and methodical. There was no emotion -no lament for their fallen comrade, only silence. The transformation had already begun. Skikk's trauma and confusion was to begin anew for legionnaire Bahuus. To whatever end, Rowan wasn't sure.

"Gjer Raest, Frykt Ingen," Sigurd chanted. "Onward Asgard! Onward Valhalla!"

"Onward Asgard! Onward Valhalla!" the men echoed.

"Can you honor Bahuus with a Virachocan prayer, Herr Guthrie?" someone asked.

Lost, Rowan froze. He felt panicked but maintained calm. Honor the dead with someone else's deity? It seemed blasphemous. He knew nothing of their pagan rituals.

"Viracocha? I don't think I could do him justice," Rowan replied.

"But you're a Suncasapa?"

"Rowan, please," Sigurd said, motioning to the menig's body.

Rowan approached the corpse as everyone kneeled. Antipathy filled him when such an honor should've humbled him. How could he say a prayer for the undead? The logic failed him. Was he saying a prayer for a transcended soul or a soul in hibernation? Not knowing what to do, he quickly whispered the words of Psalm 23 and stepped back, the crude requiem near finished.

"We'll cross Bifrost and enter Valgirnd into Odin's Great Hall, together," someone whispered.

Sigurd nodded. "Slide him in at let's get moving."

The men reloaded their weapons, waiting for one of the legionnaires to direct the unwieldy girth of the mekriger past the wreck. There wasn't

going to be enough room for Sigurd's squad to clamber on; they would have to continue on foot.

"District sikring reports say the Vanir attacked a repeater nearby, looted the place, and escaped," Sigurd paused and listened to a handheld wireless. "The main patrol will reinforce. We're going to skirt the perimeter and keep an eye out for stragglers." He slid the receiver back into his shielding and started off.

The mekriger's whining turbines grew faint from the insulated quiet of the snowy street. The vehicle left nothing behind to mark its path but a slushy hover-trail. The remaining squad marched single file, skulking through the shadows like nocturnal predators.

"Let him greet England... rush on his host as doth the melted snow," Rowan whispered, plodding through the dirty slush.

"What's that?" Sigurd mumbled with a watery rasp.

"Henry V -Shakespeare."

"What about the quote?" Sigurd asked coolly. The men stayed quiet, one ear listening for the enemy, the other listening to Rowan.

"Defiance by a French king as Henry V of England invaded his country," Rowan explained. "The snow... it reminded me."

"Why did he invade?"

"An insulting letter -at least that was the excuse. It was probably more hubris than anything."

"Maybe they felt threatened?" Sigurd said.

Rowan shrugged.

Ytter-Midgard reminded Rowan of the shadier parts of the Victorian East London -the Rookery in particular. Like the Rookery, this district was a

honeycomb of interlocking lots hemmed in by urban decay, a place rife with poverty and despair. Squinting, he could almost see it, the corner of George and High Street where as a boy he'd wait for his uncle to procure contraband stones from questionable business associates.

The Mindre Æsiri were scarce, always just out of sight. Vacant eyed children -unprejudiced and naïve- stood idly in doorways before disembodied hands could pull them back inside. They were a paranoid lot, frightened by everything. The war had reduced them to shell-shocked animals. Caught in the crossfire, they were forced to rely on primitive instinct.

They'd entered a neighborhood more ravaged than most. Buildings wobbled on piles of rubble as if split by an ax, their pocked walls burned and scorched from the inside out. The men grew tense. Their rifles panned and probed the murk with a focused eye. Dusk was approaching, swallowing light from the claustrophobic sky.

"How'd the Vanir infiltrate Ytter-Midgard?" Rowan asked, shuffling to keep pace.

"Rats drifting in with the cargo," Sigurd replied. His face was pasty in the waning light. "They're spiteful of our triumph in the face of such relentless prophecy."

"The Fimbulwinter prophecy -Ragnarok and all that?"

"Yes."

"The Vanir must have a homeland. Why not invade and conquer them?"

"Things are very different from your war, Herr Guthrie. The Vanir are stateless, everywhere and nowhere at the same time. They're like parasites, feeding off Midgard, bleeding us slowly. They

steal what they can and promote ideology with violence," Sigurd seethed. Rowan had struck a chord.

"So the Vanir are recruited in Ytter-Midgard... like an insurgency?"

Sigurd stopped and swiveled around on his boot heels. The other legionnaires looked on, bewildered.

"Let me make this clear," his voice deep and forceful. "To aid and abet Vanir insects betray the Æsiri. Vanir political legitimacy is blasphemy -an offense to Con Tiqui Viracocha, Odin, Frigga, Heimdall and the pantheon. All Æsiri have sacrificed, whether its civilians torn apart by a fanatics' bomb or the willful slaughter of innocent children." Sigurd's dilated eyes grew wide. His chest heaved. "We'll not confront Ragnarok as frightened beasts."

"I didn't know."

"Many varm-soldat legionnaires have sacrificed but now..." Sigurd trailed off, staring wide-eyed at nothing in particular.

"-Now?"

"-Now..." He looked up. "...We've something they can never take from us." Rowan hung on his stammer. Sigurd gripped his shoulder and pulled him close.

"-Immortality."

Something whistled above unseen, bristling with a static energy that cut the quiet like a knife. It was a Vanir, targeting them with a handheld mortar. Sigurd pushed Rowan to the street as the squad scattered. He craned his head to have a look but was held to the ground by a soldier, shielding him from incendiary fragments.

"Keep him down!" Sigurd roared.

"Stay put, Herr Guthrie," a legionnaire ordered, his face sweaty and nervous.

The missile had been fired from the remains of a collapsed building. A brief moment of calm gave way to hustle as Sigurd ordered the legionnaires ahead. Fire erupted from the periphery. Rowan gazed through the smoke trying to catch a glimpse of the Vanir.

The firefight intensified, reducing the scene to a jittery and overwhelming confusion. Shadows bobbed and weaved from shattered columns and buckled flotsam. Window's sparked and exploded with lung-gun blasts. Mortars lit up the quad like malfunctioning electrical circuitry. Rowan watched the squad's tactical choreography with clinical fascination.

They moved on the enemy with a clean disciplined precision, surgically dispatching their adversaries with lightning speed. It was a type of combat alien to him, modern and highly adaptable.

Someone moved behind him.

"Who goes there?" Rowan shouted.

A shrouded figure dashed into a nearby alleyway. Curious, Rowan retreated from the fray to investigate. It was a Vanir, the first he'd seen so close. The soldier wore a black mangy hood, his eyes sealed behind dim goggles. The Vanir wasn't what he'd expected -no uniform or insignia, no rank or affiliation- just a shabby paramilitary with an archaic weapon slung over his shoulder. Dirty and undisciplined, it was hard to believe such a ragtag excuse for a soldier posed any threat, especially to the forbidding Ny Æsiri.

"Stop!"

No response. The Vanir wasn't interested in a stand up fight and Rowan could hardly blame him. A

frontal assault on Sigurd's zealous legionnaires would've resulted in nothing short of suicide, best to flee and fight another day. For the Vanir, just surviving was enough of a victory.

Like a prowling jungle cat, Rowan gave into the instinct to chase. His legs glided beneath him as he scrambled through the debris-strewn alleyway. With the setting sun, his eyes dilated like a night marauder. Everything was in tune and humming. His periphery grew acute and sensitive to movement -every snowflake vivid and enhanced, his new eyes filtering out things stagnant and still.

The Vanir sped up a rickety scaffold as the chase switched to rooftops. Without pause, Rowan clambered up. His body continued to astonish, transformed with stealth and grace like a veldt leopard stalking pronghorn. Concrete chasms drifted underneath as he leapt from one rotted building to the next. Without strained breath or tiring muscles, he pressed on.

Ny Midgard's spiny skyline materialized as buildings gave way to a low-lying industrial block filled with rusty latticework. It was some kind of ancient petroleum refinery or chemical processing plant. Abandoned now, whatever function it'd served was obsolete. Rowan pulled his lung-gun and unlocked the reaction chamber. The Vanir sprinted away across a network of catwalks. The backlight from Ny Midgard made drawing a beat difficult. Squinting, he hesitated, realizing he'd never fired a lung-gun before.

With no lead on the target, he slung the rifle and clambered up the shaky trestle to continue the hunt. Slowing to gain his balance, he noticed a clank at his feet. The Vanir had dropped something

-a cartridge. Rowan picked it up and saw a crystalline glint inside a mesh casing.

The Vanir turned around to reclaim the object. Rowan aimed the lung-gun and pulled the trigger. Nothing. He squeezed the trigger again. The weapon hissed as the hydrokraft cartridge discharged. The gun was unloaded, completely empty. Rowan backed away as the Vanir stepped forward, his head cocked to the side.

"You're not like the rest." His accent was crude. "What are you?" He approached Rowan with his weapon trained.

"Stay away!"

"Listen whatever you are, hand over the cartridge or I'll..."

There was a flash. Rowan's retina saturated with the glare of white heat, a soggy blast drowning his ears in static. When vision returned, the Vanir was missing his arm and half his chest -no blood, just a blue-gray phosphorescent muck that clung to the grievous wound.

"Don't move!" Sigurd yelled. "Herr Guthrie! Back away from that Vanir!" The squad moved up and onto the flimsy trestle. Rowan quickly tucked the cartridge into his body shielding.

"I just started chasing him. During the battle he ran off behind me and I-"

"-You were told to stay put. There are things you don't understand -aren't briefed to." His voice was stern.

"I tried," Rowan rambled, confused, "-but I couldn't help it." Sigurd grabbed hold of the Vanir, doubling his body over the railing. He rifled through the man's baggy clothes looking for something.

"Niflheim, they're filthy vermin. -Did you see him with anything?"

"Anything?"

"Yes -loot, stolen information from the downlink repeater. The rest of them had nothing. They may be savages but there's method to their madness. Are you sure you didn't see him throw anything or hide something?"

Rowan paused. "No. I tried to disable him, but you'd given me an unloaded rifle-"

"-A mistake." Sigurd quickly snapped the lung-gun from Rowan. He was feverish. Neck veins bulged as he ran a hand through frazzled hair. His swarthy skin had faded to an anemic gray. Rowan was sure his rifle had been unloaded on purpose.

"You shouldn't be commanding troops with fever. Gaps in judgment on the battlefield are unforgiving. I've lived it." He thought of Lt. Richards, the lunatic. Rowan could see him standing there, flu-ridden and staggering mad with jaundiced eyes.

Sigurd pointed a stiff finger into Rowan's chest. "You'll not tell me what is best for my men. What do you know?" He stumbled back, knees shaking. "-What do you know about our war?" He rubbed his watery eyes until they turned red. The combat technician looked on, concerned.

"I wasn't being presumptuous-"

It was too late. Sigurd stumbled again and collapsed to the catwalk's grating. A combat technician rushed in to take Sigurd's vitals while another radioed the nearest sikring for assistance.

"What is it?" Rowan asked.

"A sickness -high fever, an erratic pulse, something out of the ordinary."

#

Tormod was young, maybe eighteen or nineteen. Dressed in the quick fashion of Ny Midgard, he'd a knack for its popular culture. Despite his heathen ethnicity, he'd the look of the young Tommies in Rowan's old 242nd, young men bubbling with vigor and eager for the world. He lacked tattoos, probably not high enough in Ny Æsiri status to earn his body art.

"Sverre said your excursion into Ytter-Midgard was eventful."

"There was a battle. I found it intriguing." Rowan struggled for words.

"Intriguing?"

"I was attracted to it. There was no crippling nervousness, none of that god-awful soldier's malaise. I wanted to get close, pursue, and attack," Rowan said.

Tormod grinned. He'd a knowing look. "This is the last of this filtering regiment. Physiological synthesis has been tuned for adaptability and your arcoma log shows no irregularity. The cellemaskin programming is autonomous now, associative mechanisms are fully functional--"

"-Being a dead bugger may've slowed my brain-case, but I doubt if I'd have any notion of your breather ramblings," Rowan snarled.

"You called me a breather? You made a joke, Herr Guthrie! You're coming around," Tormod laughed.

Rowan smirked.

"What I was rambling about is this: your svartblod filtering is over for this phase. I'm setting Ragna up with a portable unit so she can administer a lighter treatment. That way, you can avoid us miserable katedral crew altogether."

"I though this was my last filtering?"

"Due to emotional anomalies, Sverre would like to continue altering cellemaskin programming."

Rowan looked up at the arched ceilings. Its lamps washed the katedral's engineering bays with sterile light. Sinewy arms dangled from a central servicing tower, each mounted with various consoles, pumps, filters and tool arrays needed for dysterfolk maintenance. He felt like a Kissel lorry up on the oil rack getting his chassis refortified with grease. He gazed down and saw the purplish svartblod pushing into his chest tubes. A tangle of small hoses fed the main siphon combining the liquid like syrup at a soda fountain.

"A shame. I've enjoyed our chats Tormod. You're different," Rowan said. Youth had the knack for pledging allegiance to no higher authority, and Rowan found Tormod's candidness comforting.

"Appreciated." Tormod smiled.

"What did you mean when you mentioned anomalies?"

Tormod pulled the fitting from a chest tube and gave a quick look around before speaking. "Your emotional volatility is something that hasn't been observed in dysterfolk. It might be a possible risk for coma, something to watch."

The word emotion was abstract. Like sand slipping through his fingers, the more he tried to hold on to the idea the faster the grains escaped. The crying and the outbursts came on suddenly but left a stain. He was desperate to hold on to every precious fragment of his withered humanity despite the pain.

"It's an emergent chemistry -hyper-complex artifacts from the Skikk process."

"I'm not myself anymore, not even a mere shadow. It's like I'm missing something. I can't place it," Rowan mumbled.

He reached for Anna's ring. There was something else around his neck, something he'd forgotten. He released the cartridge from the chain and pulled it out from underneath his jumpsuit. He held it up for Tormod to take a look.

"Do you have any idea what this might be?"

Rowan handed the case over and Tormod to inspect. "A data crystal. It's a portable storage media for information. Skjærsild and the subsidiaries use them for archiving, not much else. Can I take a look?"

"By all means," Rowan said.

The tendril-chair manipulated him upright, letting Rowan lean in for a better look. Tormod released the mesh cage and pulled the oblong crystal from its holder. Rowan didn't understand how anything could be stored on such a featureless small stone.

"I just need to load it into the reader." He dropped it into a water carousel as hyper-luminescent light refracted through the rapidly spinning crystal. The console lit up. Writing and symbols scrolled rapidly across the monitor. "Interesting. Where did you say you got this?"

He held his tongue and thought up an innocuous explanation. "I found it when I was outside Skjærsild. It was just laying there."

Tormod sighed. "The files are an older format from generations back. The clans used this protocol when specific data procedures were common."

"The clans?"

"They were in power before the current unpleasantness. The Vanir weren't always here. Midgard was once at peace, back when my great-grandfather was a youngster. The Bmur was gone and Midgard was united, Fimbulwinter just a story parents told children to frighten them. Back then you'd have to travel miles just to catch a glimpse of the glaciers. The clans were the ruling families of the subsidiary councils. Before Tyrian consolidation, they'd their own data protocols - proprietary measures to ward off competition. Not much else is known about them," Tormod explained. He continued to scan the information as it flashed by.

"Is it a history?" Rowan asked.

"I can't tell. It's using outdated cryptography and there's no key. It probably doesn't exist anymore, buried with the clansman who owned it. There are a few encrypted partitions, probably used to consolidate technical data. But there's no way to crack the message."

"Un-crackable cryptography? Day late and a few quid short there -I could have used that lot in the Great War. The Huns deciphered our messages as soon as we'd send them. It was bloody useless-"

"-Although, it has an interesting origin-tag," Tormod continued. Rowan looked on, confused. "It's a labeling scheme used for long-link transmission. The celestial routing says it was relayed through a Bifrost repeater on Asgard. The switching log is erased beyond that, like someone wanted to hide their footprints to keep it anonymous. It looks like a rogue communication." Geometric patterns whirled across the monitors as Tormod frenetically followed them.

"What do you think the message says?"

"Could be anything really, administrative communiqués, Ægir logistical requests, Surtur thermal data... probably something gruesomely unexciting. There's a name attached to the tag." Tormod keyed in more commands. "Tortstein Amundsen. It's not a common Ny Æsiri surname, used to have some clan affiliation but..." He keyed in more commands. "-Yep! That's it, just keeps repeating that name over and over." Tormod slowed the carousel and pulled the crystal out, handing it back to Rowan.

"What should I do with it?"

"-Keep it. It'll make an interesting souvenir. Who knows? Maybe this Torstein Amundsen was having intimate conversations with Con Tiqui Viracocha, channeling him through the halls of Valhalla!" Tormod laughed. "Giving up all the mysteries of the Æsiri, unlocking the prophecies of Ragnarok, or-"

"-Alright Tormod. Enough. I'm glad you're entertained."

"-Or maybe they were both sharing a rousing game of celestial chess?"

"-If you're done, unhook me," Rowan sneered, annoyed.

There was a groan from somewhere in the katedral; they weren't alone. There was a commotion on the other side of the servicing tower just out of sight. Rowan was curious.

"What's that?" he asked, straining to catch a glimpse.

"Business as usual," Tormod said, draining the svartblod reservoirs.

The tendril-chair contorted and stood Rowan to his feet. He stepped over to have a look. It was a dysterfolk like him being attended to by an

Skjærsild engineer. He recognized the man's face. It was Menig Bahuus. His neck wound from a few days ago had rapidly transformed, the cellemaskin going about its microscopic repairs. The menig's mind wasn't with him yet, still in the twilight of coma and arcoma.

"Do you recognize him?"

"It's Menig Bahuus. I said a prayer for him after the mekriger ambush."

Rowan noticed the man's clouded eyes as they gazed up at nothing. The menig was a living doll - a marionette writhing awkwardly from uncoordinated strings. Like a fish out of water, his mouth gaped as he struggled for the air he no longer needed.

"Looks like they're still stabilizing him. He'll come out of it. Some fight it more than others - Have you got it under control, Ulrik?"

"Yeah. He's fresh from the rebirthing chamber. Finn's work's been sloppy lately since him," Ulrik said, pointing a tool at Rowan. "Jorunn got promoted to second tier and it's made Finn -how should I say this- unenthusiastic? He thought he should've been promoted instead. It's been Niflheim for the katedral since -trying to fix the screw-ups."

"I haven't seen one of them before," Rowan mumbled, mesmerized.

"A dysterfolk? Herr Guthrie, shall I get a mirror?" Tormod smirked.

"No. This is different."

It was clear now. He and the menig were brothers, fallen soldiers now resurrected. He looked into Bahuus' eyes and felt a blasphemy at work. It was a simmering natural spite, a rage against life's quiet order. Rowan knew the dead. He recalled their tragic beauty, the empty gazes

as he clambered through the trenches. Most of them were young and full of life.

"Ready?" Tormod asked.

"Yes. Let's leave."

[TD] CHAPTER FIVE

Rowan peered through the field periscope, the snow dissolving with the gray light of morning. Patches of slushy snow littered the battlefield, Mother Nature's anemic attempt to whitewash the carnage. The gloom hid the sun's faint shafts as they struggled to penetrate the lifting haze. He could see them now, shadows merging in and out of the leaden fog. It was of the last of saboteur teams making their way back through the tumult of No Man's Land. Rowan had sent out a few of the new recruits to boost morale and build camaraderie, a way for the young Tommies to get on with it and avoid the firestep's idle madness.

The barrage intensified with the morning light. Cold and frightened, the regiment's greenhorns clung to trench as dirt poured down over them. Rowan put away his binoculars and surveyed the traverse. Vicious geysers of shrapnel exploded down the line, the heat turning the heavy snowflake into rain.

Rowan and his officers devised the formation the previous night, hardened corporals and veterans at the front with fresh recruits at the rear. No one complained. The old sweats knew best not to leave veteran duty to men with but a few razor-burns for their battle scars. Too much was at stake, reversing the order was too risky. Lt. Guthrie prayed the foundering ship would stay afloat long enough to hold off the onslaught's brunt.

Master Sergeant Wallace readied the demolition contingent for Bangalore detonation, the crack of artillery barely evoking a wince. It looked a

tangled mess -copper wire half-immersed in greasy mud, twisting its way from the battery cell's bailing spool up and over the sandbags to the fuses. All of them needed to detonate in sequence. An ill-timed blast would sever the leads and the trench line would be broken leaving Tommies scrambling from ditch to ditch and exposing them to the German gunners.

"Careful with those plungers, lads," Sgt. Wallace said, glowering at the fidgety hands of the demolition crew as they readied the ignition charges. "Remember your number... one after the other... real easy. Don't go making this difficult for all of us."

This was the morning; there was no doubt. Rowan was sure of it. Throughout the night the shelling had been relentless. The Huns were starting to mix case shot in with the ordnance, warped metal and broken chain flung from impact craters at cruel speeds. Rowan feared it worse than gas, a weapon capable of dicing men like a wall of spinning cutlery.

"See to it master sergeant that the Vickers teams get what they need. I'm going back to survey the line. Send a runner if the registers report the enemy advance," Rowan ordered, hopping down from the fire step.

"Stand-to!" Sgt. Wallace yelled. The soldiers stood at attention, their Enfields firmly held to their shoulders. "Officer to inspect!"

Rowan started down the communications trench. He'd ordered a full battle-order and was determined to insure every canteen and cartridge was right where it needed to be. The men's faces varied, some colorless and empty, a few panicked and wincing, others with expressed doom and

acquiescence. Further on down the line he heard someone retching.

He approached a young soldier, crumpled and unable to control his faculties. His boyish face was flush, tears flowing down his cheeks. A swipe of his shirt-cuff wiped the vomit from the corners of his mouth soiling what was until recently a brand-new and slightly oversized uniform. Bloodshot eyes strained to meet Lt. Guthrie's.

"Up with you, lad! There's a good gentleman," Rowan ordered. No response. Panic had reduced the boy to a shivering animal. It looked as if nothing short of death or the Mother Mary herself would free him from his fit.

"I don't need to tell you again, lad. Up with you!"

Angered, Rowan swung in to pick the boy up only to be stopped by his 2nd lieutenant.

"Sir, if I may," Peters interrupted, pulling the soldier from the muck and straightening his gear. "Salute an officer when you're addressed, private!" Peters roared. The boy snapped a shaky salute as the 2nd lieutenant spun him around into formation. "Sorry 'bout that lieutenant captain. We've been having troubles with this youngster since he arrived."

"Lt. Peters, I realize a week's not long to condition fresh recruits but pull your unit together," Rowan whispered. "I thought we'd an understanding."

"It's just that-" Peters said, cringing from a near-hit. "-Being here... the noise... all of it -I thought I'd feel different about it, sir." The lieutenant was gaunt-gray. His haunted eyes frozen in sunken sockets. His cheeks twitched in permanent agitation.

"Do what you have to do, lieutenant, for the sake of your men. They're looking to you for strength. You're the last battalion to make the push which means you'll be in the phosgene. Make sure the men have their respirators." Rowan grew frustrated, despondency gurgling acidic in his belly. Lt. Peters' recklessness was contagious and if he let it infect him, all was lost.

"It's just that-" Peters mumbled.

"-Peters, if you remember one order I give you this day remember this, survive. That's all I ask."

"Survive," Peters repeated the word, eyes focused with cheerless determination.

A lull in the firestorm heralded the yelp of a runner. "The push is on! The Huns are coming!" With a nod to his 2nd lieutenant he sprinted off for the breach.

The timing of the advance was dead on to Rowan's forecast. His prescience for battle was mutating into a steadfast savvy. A peer through the periscope revealed the Hun lines. The Bosch Pickelhaubes were on the move -wraiths creeping through the frigid destruction of No Man's Land.

"On the ready line! Sgt. Wallace, detonate the Bangalorees"

"Begin the detonation!" Wallace hollered.

Men scrambled down the sides of the forward traverse, shielding themselves from the blast. The demolition crew dropped the plungers. The anticipation was too much. Rowan hopped on the firestep and looked through the periscope. Plumes of earth erupted out of the mists as the sequence started. The Bosch scattered and tumbled into the impact craters avoiding what they thought to be a counter-barrage. Fuse-like, the blasts rippled

back towards the regiment line. Each torpedo tilled the rotten dirt like a mythic plow. He pursed his lips unable to look away.

"They've advanced to the forward wire!" Sgt. Wallace hollered as he pulled Rowan back from the scope. The last blast discharged, sending an avalanche of wet earth into the forward line, half burying the men.

"Dig you bastards!" the sergeant growled, grabbing a shovel and trudging through the loam towards the ragged 'V' of the breach.

Rowan loaded a fresh cartridge into his Enfield. No officer's pistol this time; there was no way to fix a bayonet to it and no way to truncheon a Bosch with it. It was all or nothing -no British tradition or ritual; the Great War had ended all that.

He'd ordered the White-Star to be deployed a quarter-hour after the Bangalores. Time grew desperate. Rowan needed to thread a thousand men through the tumult of the narrow funnel and quickly. Agonizing minutes passed as he surveyed the digging. Smoke flowed from the breach with an acrid sting that watered the eyes.

Like souls at the gates of Dis, the soldiers clambered over each other in a muddy fervor to clear the way. The Vicker's crew assembled. The men fell in as the last of the dirt was cleared. Sgt. Wallace and two squads of machine gunners were to follow Rowan with Lt. Simon's and Peters' battalions providing the enfilade against the advancing Huns.

The parapet was agape, revealing a shallow ditch that gave Rowan pause. It wasn't the parted Red Sea Moses had delivered to the Israelites, but it was all God was going to give him.

"On the ready line!" Rowan roared, drown out by the din of case-shot. "Advance!" He blew an ear-splitting whistle blast. The line lurched forward and inched into the fray.

"...Imitate the action of a tiger"

He crawled into the blasted shallow conduit -so shallow a bantam would've had a go trying to avoid the Bosch fusillade. Unease wracked his innards as he tried to build momentum. Failure ached in his bones.

"-Stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood"

The hollers of the Bosch advance filled the air, the enemy now only a few yards from the makeshift sap. It was a smelly soggy mess. Remnants of torpedo shrapnel lay embedded in the muck mixed with fragments of wire and human detritus.

"Disguise fair nature with hard-favored rage-"

He crept further into the network of craters and slapdash ditchworks. It wasn't like he'd planned. The crack of the rifles, the smoke, the yelling and whistling shells, all worked to camouflage the plan's clinical machinations. He looked over his shoulder. The Vickers crew had bogged down, the cumbersome weight of the machinegun too awkward for the lightning advance. Exhaustion grizzled their clammy faces. They were lumbering more than charging but there was no other way. Retreat wasn't an option. The way out was through.

They needed to be quicker.

"Then lend the eye a terrible aspect, let pry through the portage of the head-"

Word from the rear put Lt. Peters' battalion halfway through the breach when the White Star dispersed. The smog welled up like flash pot, a curtain of poison hundreds of feet high. Rowan knew if Peters weren't up to snuff there'd be

nothing left of the rear flank but swarms of gasping men, their lungs burning.

The advance slowed giving the rear battalions time to take aim at the wave of retreating Bosch. The gas had thrown off the Hun push. It was a stunning blow but the initiative was fleeting. If the enfilade lacked the necessary efficiency it'd be that many more Hun bastards to truncheon when the Tommies toppled into the enemy's trench.

"Sgt. Wallace," Rowan barked. "Keep up the advance! We've got to keep it moving!"

Rowan blasted the whistle and clambered forward. The craters were ever deeper as they slipped into the frigid ooze. Over and over, they slogged through sodden pits trying to pull themselves out, one brutal yard at a time. The routine grew exhausting. The makeshift trench was just enough cover for the bulk of the advancing forces. Progress was slow, but the battalions hadn't broke. The advance held steady.

Lt. Guthrie halted the push. The folded body of a British saboteur lay partially submerged in a brackish pool ahead. A sniper's bullet had ripped through the man's Brodie forming a twisted braid of frozen blood that covered his face. Rowan slung his rifle and waded in to pull the tags from the body.

"It's Cpl. Irons!" Rowan hollered.

"That's him!" the sergeant yelled as he crawled over. "Never came back. It's over the top from here."

"How far?"

"I spotted a pillbox yonder just a few yards. We're almost there. I can hear the Huns' guns barking. Their forward position I'd suspect."

"Bring the men forward. Sure up the advance."

"Yes Sir! We've taken a lot of casualties - slowing us up a bit. The Huns retreated into our lines trying to dodge the gas. The men had a difficult go at it in their respirators. Some panicked, but it was real fist-a-cuffs... bayonets, the lot of it."

"Still advancing?" Rowan asked.

"Real wild dogs! Good lads"

"Good lads indeed," Rowan sighed.

He crept to the edge of the crater rim. The sergeant was right. The pillbox was heavily fortified and smoking like a demon. Like maniacs, the Bosch gunners fired at anything and everything, ripping into their own ragtag retreat in the confusion.

"Jittery buggers."

"I'm going to make a run at it and try to get a flag raised."

"There's Alleymen swarming the rear! We're outnumbered!"

"Between the phosgene and our Tommies' enfilade, I'd reckon the lot of those Hun wretches are rat kibble. I'm pushing in, sergeant. Get the Vickers team into position. It doesn't matter if they hit anything just give the Bosch hell."

Sgt. Wallace grew guarded -Lt. Richards' ghost lingering like sulfur. Rowan could sense it.

"If we can hold this position a little longer we'll get more firepower forward," Wallace lamented.

"A little longer, sergeant, and the Hun case-shot will shred us into stumps and screams. After I push, get the Vickers squads over their parapets and down into the trench."

"Sir!" Wallace saluted.

Rowan made his bid. With every passing second the incoming fire grew more intense and the explosions more deafening. Loading his last cartridge, he grabbed at his coat and groped for the ring underneath -fingers too clumsy to feel the delicate gemstone through the thick wool.

"Like the brass cannon, let the brow overwhelm... now set the teeth and stretch the nostrils wide..."

The Vickers sputtered to life as Rowan launched at the pillbox. Like dragon's breath, the German machinegun let loose a cone of flame. The bullets whistled by. Rowan let go a few hasty shots as he threw himself over the lip of the parapet and into the enemy trench. Pulling a 'No. 15' from his webbing he triggered the fuse and lobbed the hissing grenade through the doorway. The fire stopped, giving way to manic yelling as they tried to throw the grenade back outside; but it was too late. The concussion blew out the narrow entrance filling the trench with tangy smoke.

Reeling with ringing ears, Rowan gathered his senses. The enemy trench hadn't been reinforced leaving this particular Bosch pillbox open to attack. There wasn't much time. By now, the German commanders were cued in. By any stretch, Rowan's depleted regiment was not prone to counter-assault. The logic had not only failed the enemy but the majority of Rowan's restless ranks as well.

The tides of hopelessness receded with the gloom. He felt it, a fervor surging through the ranks. Rowan's regiment was gaining ground against harrowing odds.

The pillbox was blackened from the inside out. He heard a groan in the corner interrupted by the sporadic pops of errant machine gun rounds. With a

quick bayonet jab Rowan ended the misery. A ruby glow filled the smoldering ruin. He looked through the gun slit. A wall of flame engulfed the old regimental lines, the fire shimmering through the heavy dust and gas. The morning snow was gone, thawed by the scorch of battle. Through the waste a river of his battered battalions snaked through No Man's Land.

"All clear, master sergeant! Move 'em up!"

"Sir!" Sgt. Wallace shouted.

Rowan pulled out the triangular folds of the Union Jack and flew the wrinkled standard on a makeshift pole. He heard his men's muffled cheers as they rallied forward.

A chill sweat dripped down the hollow of his back. Catharsis was with him -fear -anger -an elation warped into a content exhaustion. After a deep breath, the battle noise began anew. The German second wave was funneling through the trench en masse, the Huns hell-bent on dismantling Rowan's beachhead.

Shaky hands slammed another cartridge into his Enfield as Rowan stumbled outside. The Vickers squad had assembled in the trench with only seconds to load and fire into the Hun traverse. Mauser bullets ricocheted up the line. Blue smoke choked the trench as both sides exchanged fire.

"Sgt. Wallace!" Rowan screamed.

The sergeant's hazy outline flickered with the Vickers' muzzle flash.

"Sgt. Wallace!" Rowan yelled again. "Move the men forward!"

Nothing.

The Vickers jammed. Frantic, the confused squad yelled as the sergeant struggled to maintain the assault. The Germans scrambled down the duckboards

loaded for bear. Time grew desperate with every fumble. The zealous Tommies had forgotten to release the trigger from their death grip, overheating the machine gun and seizing the feed.

"Hold hard the breath... On you noblest English."

The fervor that'd quickly overwhelmed faded like a dream. Lt. Rowan Guthrie -either by circumstance or by command- had become an instrument of his dilemma, exhausted with no sanctuary or respite.

With nowhere to aim, Rowan marked his charge and emptied his rifle into the faceless ahead, staggering as a bullet tore through his thigh. He limped on unfazed until the smoke parted to reveal a wall of German soldiers, sharp faces contorted by battle.

Rowan cudgeled the first with his rifle butt and bayoneted a second in the chest. A Luger went off near his ear, deafening him. He skewered and killed a third Alleyman. Blood trickled down his temple, coating his neck with a sticky wetness. He reeled from the head wound.

The enemy deformed into a blur as Rowan's leg buckled, his body collapsing against the sandbags. His eyes froze but sight remained, the world just fragments distorted by the time-fog. He dragged himself further until at last he fell and tumbled to the soggy duckboards below. The un-jammed Vickers snarled to life releasing a black-powder tantrum into the German ranks, narrowly missing him. Well-worn German boots kicked into his helmet as they raced by in a panicked route. Someone stumbled then toppled on top him, the deep mud oozing around his body as the weight pushed him down.

Rowan fought to pull himself out from underneath the motionless German bantam. Smoke drifted from

the half-dozen bullet holes that'd perforated the boy's uniform. Fresh blood was everywhere, turning the gray mud into purplish oil. He manically looked for his Brodie. Bewildered, he couldn't remember when or where he'd lost the damnable thing, only to realize a few moments later it was still securely strapped to his head. A wave of British Tommies followed in pursuit, the men patting his shoulder and congratulating him as they sped past.

"Sir, we've got those Bosch vermin on the lam! They're abandoning the battery and retreating to their reserve trenches!"

"Aye!" Rowan replied, looking back at the splayed German. "Continue the push..."

"Sir!" Sgt. Wallace saluted.

Taking a closer look Rowan saw his own dim reflection in the boy's dark lifeless eyes. He extended his filthy hands to the Hun's face and pulled his eyelids shut. The soldier's warmth caused him to shiver. Unlike the dead boy at his dugout, this lad was new to death, forever frozen in its quiet embrace.

"Show us... the mettle of your pasture... The game's afoot, follow your spirit, ...Cry God for... England."

[TD] CHAPTER SIX

"Why are you wearing those? You remind me of Sigurd," Ragna said, repulsed.

"It's too bright. My eyes are having a time of it." Rowan reclined on the sofa, lazily looking out the hosloft's window.

"I'll tint the windows and you can take those off. They interfere with the monitoring equipment." She walked over and adjusted the panel.

His run-in with the undead Bahuus had given him unwanted perspective. Ugliness flooded in as he held a quivering hand to his face.

"Do you know if Sigurd's recovering?"

"Recovering? Was he wounded?" she said indifferently.

"No. He'd an ailment -a fever- and had succumb to the illness while we were on patrol in Ytter-Midgard."

"That's news," Ragna said surprised. "It's not uncommon. Plague and disease are difficult to inoculate against if you serve beyond the Bmur. I wouldn't be surprised if the Vanir didn't have something to do with it. Sigurd is..." she paused, searching for the right words, "very single minded when it comes the Vanir. They know him personally you might say."

"Do you think they've infected him with something?"

"They've done worse." Ragna's face pinched with disgust. Rowan had touched on something personal. "Remove your hand." He reluctantly pulled his hand

away from his brow. Embarrassed, Rowan forced himself to look at her.

She was silent as she tended to the portable filtering unit. Smaller than the katedral's industrial version, the new machine's siphon avoided the chest and attached through a smaller spigot just underneath the wrist. Rowan found the tuning process baffling; its voodoo machinations were so much magic. He could only lend his good sense enough to trust Skjærsild's cohorts to their electrochemical stew.

"Was it someone you knew?"

"Who?"

"The Vanir, the violence."

"It was my father."

"I'm sorry Ragna. I didn't mean-"

"-He worked for a Surtur distribution enclave, responsible for regulation and rationing of hydrokraft -one of the largest in Midgard. Like most of Surtur's infrastructure, it was a target of Vanir attack. Without Surtur's energy our industries weaken, the Ny Æsiri weaken. But this was different. It started a new trend." Ragna stopped and sat down, eyes fixed to the floor.

"I'm afraid to ask."

"He was third tier and managed four hundred workers at the time. One of them must've infiltrated the Mindre Æsiri day laborers. They wear lots of heat shielding in the recombination chambers, and it was hard to detect the interloper. The condensation racks slide into high-pressure ovens loaded with portable cells. The Vanir must've put..." she paused, her lower eyelashes moistening, "-must've put something inside the oven along with the catalyst. It imploded, releasing toxic levels of carbon dioxide

into the breathing filters along with biological agents. The whole enclave was suffocating. But it was the..."

Her voice wavered. Tears streamed down her cheeks. Rowan's shame dissolved. He was captivated. Like a moth to the flame, he drew close.

"They were too weak to escape the bacterium. It ate at them and left nothing behind. My father's body was unrecognizable. We couldn't identify him. The site was too contaminated; they had to demolish the enclave where it stood -no burial -no requiem."

"Christ in heaven."

"-It's been some time now, so difficult to recall. Reports said the Vanir were testing new ways to attack Ny Æsiri legions. Their spies picked up on the dysterfolk rumors. They were looking for a way to counteract Skikk by dissolving the dead before they could be reanimated. It didn't matter to me; it was simply murder, nothing more."

"What happened to the saboteur?"

"It was a suicide operation. He killed himself in the attack along with everyone else."

"Atrocious, I don't know what to say. The Huns used to get desperate but never to that degree, never resorting to the likes of assassins. Both sides in the Great War were just scared I guess, staring at each other from across No Man's Land and thinking how best to get home. None of us lot wanted victory that bad. Suicide? Seems right wasteful and meaningless -no way to win."

"-Wasteful and pointless. The Vanir are vermin - a virus with no other purpose than to weaken and

break us. But they won't win. Ny Midgard and the Ny Æsiri will never fall."

Ragna dabbed her eyes then activated the optical coupler to start the portable filtering unit. Sparkle-light filled his retina as a focused beam fed information to the cellemaskin via the macula. Ragna was quiet as he gazed out the window at the skeletal towers looming through the haze.

"Was he a good man? A good father?"

"Very much, but I find it hard to remember detail. In a way, maybe I'm afraid. He was warm, kind, gentle and very protective."

"It's good to see a thousand years hasn't changed fathers that much." Rowan gave her a shy smile.

"Do you know of The Edda? It's a Ny Æsiri holy book, full of the poems and legends of our people."

"I'm unfamiliar," Rowan replied.

"There was a story about Alvis, a dwarf who courted Thor's daughter, Thrud, a Valkyrie. Alvis was a smithy of Svartalfaheim. Regarded as worthy suitor by most, he was to wed Thrud in exchange for fashioning weapons for the Æsir gods. Thor found him too small for his liking and ill suited for a Valkyrie, so he challenged Alvis to prove his worth. Knowing dwarves to be slow in wisdom and thick, he devised a series of trials to test his judgment.

"Eager to show his meddle, Alvis lost track of time as Thor kept him busy throughout the night. Thor had remembered that dwarves turn to stone in sunlight and unfortunately Alvis had forgotten. It was too late. Alvis lost the wit-battle and was petrified by morning's light. Thrud remained unmarried." A smile escaped her as the tears

started to dry. "My mother used to tease me with that story when my parents arranged suitors. My father never liked my mother's choices."

"Charming, but is it true? The Ny Æsiri don't marry for love?" Rowan asked.

"We love the ones we wed."

"But your mother and father chose someone for you?"

"Of course. That's the way it's been since Con Tiqui Viracocha created Midgard. It's the way of our people. There's the rare occasions, but it's uncommon."

"One of my training officers had been deployed to Rawalpindi in the Punjab. Arranged marriages were the norm there. It was the first time I'd heard of it so widespread -mostly a royal penchant, bit of the old world. But now -a thousand years on- I wouldn't have thought," Rowan's mind drifted. He thought of the ancient Earth filled with long abandoned ritual and vanished custom.

"When did you marry?"

"I didn't. After my father died, I just couldn't. It didn't feel right. I was adrift; hopes and wants had lost their mooring." He looked at her and saw pain skirting the surface. She was mesmerizing, a timeless beauty haunted with quiet desperation. "It was just my mother and myself and there wasn't much for dowry. I had to find work. So here I am."

"...Here you are."

The filter machine wound down as the tuner disengaged from the eye coupler. Ragna pulled the siphon from his wrist. He slid the dark eyeshades back on, a small ruse to fool himself and avoid stigma. Beyond the hosloft the marine layer

lifted. He looked through channels of metal and glass towards the horizon, a sliver of blue ocean glimmering in the distance.

"Is that one of the enclaves?" Rowan asked, pointing to a set of wide stacks belching vapor.

"Muspel, it's the largest of Surtur's central processing centers. You can see the Stillehavet pipeline terminus near the southern fjord."

It was an entangled complex encased in tubular superstructure, different than most of Ny Midgard's architecture. The sea boiled around the huge pipe's algae-ringed waterline as it emerged from the sloshing sea.

"What's in them?"

"Hydrogenated slurry, harvested close to the undersea volcanoes hundreds of kilometers offshore -Ægir's Hearth they call it. It's pumped to us here in Ny Midgard where it's processed. I don't know much more about that particular facility. My father worked further inland."

"Take me. I want see Muspel," Rowan said.

"Not possible. There's no way. Herr Berjon wouldn't allow it, especially after your episode at the temple. Ytter-Midgard was one thing, but this? Skjærsild won't take another risk." Ragna shot Rowan an impossible look.

He took a sip of hydrokraft then looked at her. Her visits usually ended frigidly as their conversations would predictably grow awkward. The illusion that Rowan was an uncanny substitute for something living inevitably dissolved. Then like a housecat she would dart away. This time however, he'd drawn something out -something human and vulnerable. It was raw emotion or anger, but he couldn't be sure.

"Conceal me. We'll go clandestinely," Rowan pleaded.

"You've seen much Rowan, more of Midgard than most dysterfolk. Why this? Is it because of my father?"

"I don't know... maybe. This commodity your people militaristically ration must be worth a look. Seems your whole society hinges on it -lives and dies by it," Rowan struggled to explain. "It's the chance to observe first hand the engines of a culture, a chance to see the gold mines of the Spanish Conquistadors -De Gama's Malabar spice markets, a Bedouin Frankincense grove... insatiable historical curiosity perhaps. I don't know. I just want to see it. Humor me."

"Morbid curiosity more like it," Ragna sighed.

"Ragna, please. It's just-"

"-Alright, Muspel then. I'll see what I can do. Both Sverre and Sigurd needn't know. Promise?"

Rowan nodded.

#

The platform teemed with commuters when the train unloaded. The Skjærsild uniforms fit Ragna better than Rowan, his oversized parka doing the job of hiding his wandering eyes. They were posing as Skjærsild procurement specialists looking to observe the manufacturing processes. Common among the subsidiaries, Ragna didn't think their visit would attract suspicion.

"When we get there, let me do the talking. Your accent's too thick. We don't need any unwanted questions."

Ragna was uneasy, more so than Rowan. She wove purposefully through the street traffic to avoid the patrolling paramilitaries. Rowan shuffled a

few steps behind, fighting the fluid bustle of the crowd.

Dusk approached as snow floated down in flurries. The world was drab, his eyeshades inadequate to enhance certain details in the waning daylight. Flashes of multicolored confusion whirled overhead, Ny Midgard's attention grabbing symbols perpetually on display. The frantic advertisements and marquees numbed the eyes with consumption. Woven into the frantic landscape, the Ny Æsiri ironically paid them little attention.

The city emptied into an industrial zone in Ny Midgard's sea district. Rowan looked back at Skjærsild. Low storm clouds had moved in leaving the black building a headless monolith. He looked for his hosloft to get a sense of direction, but it was impossible. Regardless, he managed to gather his bearings. Days spent looking out the window had burned Ny Midgard's maze of non-Euclidean corridors into his brain like a living map.

They followed a narrow spit towards the Muspel enclave. Beds of sea farms extended out over a wide fjord as floating harvesters pulled a dense soup of aquatic delicacies from the littoral pens. As they walked, the fashions drifted from the couture of the inner city to the proletariat garb of Ytter-Midgard. Rowan recognized Mindre Æsiri laborers -not so much by their clothes but by a desperate look that clung to them like bad odor. They kept their heads down, unwilling to look the Ny Æsiri in the eye. Some tended the dredges while others worked the docks, loading and unloading crates filled with ambiguous piles of sea life.

Ragna stopped and threw back her hood.

"This is wrong -I shouldn't have snuck you out and interrupted your scheduled sleep cycle. They'll find out -Sverre and Sigurd will find out-"

"-Ragna," Rowan said calmly. "I'll take responsibility if something happens. I doubt Sigurd has enough constitution to get out of hospital let alone sanction us."

"If something happens the consequences may be cataclysmic."

"Ragna, please. You're being impractical." Rowan tried to smile.

"Stop it!" she said, holding her hand to his mouth. "Don't smile. They'll notice the galvanization." Her eyes shifted anxiously as she scanned the causeway. He grabbed hold of her wrist and pulled her arm away.

"Ragna, I promise I won't let anything happen. Now let's get on with it."

"Promise?" She jerked her arm free and headed up the spit. "Promises are wasted words for lovers and fools."

"Can't much disagree," he whispered.

When they arrived, a mekriger was guarding a holding cordon packed with Mindre awaiting the shift change. The gunners sat silent scrutinizing the workers with sensor-heavy weaponry, each cannon probing the laborers like insect antennae. A guard gave Ragna a swift nod and allowed them to pass, their Skjærsild insignia giving them the necessary credentials to avoid the ominous security detail.

A long-limbed man greeted them in the forward lobby. Dressed in administrative attire, he introduced himself as Raynor, a first tier inter-subsidary relations expert. Rowan had long since

grown exasperated. Ny Midgard's complicated bureaucracies were impossible. From what he could tell, Raynor was a diplomat in charge of smoothing business deals. Following Ragna's orders, Rowan stood back, closed lip, and quiet.

"Frue Ragna Fjoren I presume, energy procurement at Skjærsild? I received your tour request this morning, so you'll have to excuse my lack of preparation."

She hesitated then motioned in Rowan's direction. "This is one of the engineers from my division, Herr Rowan."

Rowan nodded and smiled, careful not to disturb the cosmetics Ragna had applied to hide his pallid condition.

"Interesting name. Are you an engineer? The drinkable hydrokraft I heard was a success -less rejection during the Skikk process with no psychotic breakdown. That'll mean much to Skjærsild. Surtur is greatly encouraged by your progress. Are you here to observe the condensate fabrication? It's quite the prototype, a new process for hyper-saturation of the portable mixture," Raynor asked.

Rowan had no idea what the man was talking about and by the look in Ragna's eyes, neither did she. They did their best to play-act.

"No, not really-" Rowan said.

"-We're here to orient ourselves with the workings of the recombination chambers," Ragna interrupted. "We need to get a feel for the scheduling and delivery needs of the hydrokraft. The Congress of Tyr has made demands for more dysterfolk and we're trying to accommodate."

He'd been wrong about her. Rowan's first impression of Ragna faded. She wasn't naïve or

insular like he'd thought but resourceful and independently minded, a woman far removed from the zeitgeist of Rowan's post-Victorian England.

"Very well," Raynor said. "I'll oblige you best I can."

He led them through corridors and meandering gangways. A mechanical hum vibrated the structure drowning out Raynor's spiel. It didn't matter. Rowan's cobwebbed-brain would clog with anything less than simple-minded explanations of Muspel's inner workings. Inferring what he could, he guessed the factory was like any other industry - workers put their hands to a raw material producing a good, that good was then delivered to a shipping dock, etcetera.

Here, the raw good was hydrogenated slurry generated by thermal-electric derricks tapped from submersed volcanoes. Its product was burnable hydrogen and portable hydrokraft. How these feats of abyssal engineering were completed, Rowan couldn't begin to imagine. Ny Æsiri wonders were nothing less than magic -necromancy conjured from the blood of the earth like elemental alchemy.

"This is the hydrogen separation room. Most of it is channeled into the turbines and dynamos at Ny Midgard's core. The rest is piped into the recombination chambers where the hydrokraft condensates and its variants are produced," Raynor explained.

Rowan gazed through thick glass at the separation complex. The air was polluted, more terrible than industrial Manchester on its worst day. Hundreds of Mindre in oversized rubber suits slogged through pools of gray-green silt raking sea muck into shallow drains. It was a never-ending task. Endless sludge poured from mouth-like

hatches overwhelming the workers as they steadied themselves to keep from slipping under the ooze.

"The reactants are added and the slurry is heated. The liberated hydrogen is de-ionized and channeled into vents above."

Rowan looked into the rafters. Tethered gantries suspended the workers' breathing tubes while hurricane-vortices sucked hydrogen into screaming intakes.

"It's like Hell," Rowan said.

"Did you say something, Herr Rowan?" Raynor asked.

He shook his head as Ragna silently scolded him.

"If you'll follow me, we'll walk over to the hydrokraft recombination chambers. I suppose that's what Skjærsild is most interested in anyway."

He grew curious as Raynor continued. Hydrokraft was a mystery. Rowan felt no hunger or weakness from lack of food. Eating had no practical meaning, but his need for hydrokraft was insatiable. Emerging from the sleep cycles, he craved it like an alcoholic craved the bottle. His mind was consumed with addiction. It didn't matter if it was drank or pumped; the habit was obdurate.

"We've been able to tune metabolic rates for various applications. The higher grades of condensed hydrokraft have longer leads than traditional manufacturing, but the fuel's sustainability is exceptionally suited for portable applications -perfect for Asgard."

Raynor led them through a reinforced bulkhead into a control room, throbbing with electric noise. A dozen technicians paid them little mind; they were too busy monitoring the activity outside the glass. Ragna lingered as Raynor walked up to

an observation platform. The Mindre workers were tending monster blast ovens below, loading and unloading dollies full of glowing blue canisters. Rowan had no sense of temperature, but he detected scorching heat beyond the reinforced window. It blurred everything, warping light into a fluid mirage.

"The saturation requires enormous heat and pressure. The turbine-jets have to be continually fired during unload and load or we risk blowback from the injectors. That's why the workers wear water-suits. We've gone to fourteen-hour shifts to increase efficiency."

Rowan looked over his shoulder and noticed Ragna impassively standing behind them. She looked ill. Waiting for questions, Raynor gave them a puzzled look. Rowan's coughs and theatrical twitches failed to cue her. He was compelled to talk.

"Yes," Rowan hesitated, searching for a worthy question. "Why are the workers standing on those lines?" He couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Security procedures required after certain unfortunate incidents halted Surtur operations." Rowan noticed the laborers tediously standing lockstep along a network of thin fluorescent lines. "If they step off for any reason -any reason at all- those take care of it." Raynor pointed to an automated cannon nearby. He noticed the guns everywhere, suspended bat-like from ceiling stanchions.

"Vanir infiltrators," Rowan said, trying his best to mimic the Æsiri's guttural staccato. He wouldn't be able to hold the conversation for long.

"They've made our job more difficult, but we won't let fear stop us."

"Can I ask you another question, Herr Raynor?"

"Of course."

"I was wondering -with such advancement- why isn't it possible to automate all this and eliminate the need for manual labor altogether?"

"Automate?" Raynor smirked. "Too expensive, too much energy investment. Surtur has found that it's cheaper to employ the Mindre. Midgard's forced to ration every last ounce of hydrogen and hydrokraft."

Rowan looked at the workers again, hundreds of them toiling like automatons. One caught his eye. Through the water distorted mask and heat, he noticed a face staring back at him. He remembered a face like it from his past, a throbbing desperate honesty coupled to fragile humanity. They were children mostly, laborers shackled to the Black Country's coalfields and imprisoned by poverty and debt, lives stolen by circumstance out of their control. Like a slave, the man below had been stripped of everything but fear. He looked up at Rowan hopelessly begging him -anyone- to save him from his inner animal.

"I think we should leave-," Ragna said.

He turned around. Rowan leapt in to catch her as she fainted. She was light as a feather, her weight resting comfortably in the crooks of his arms. She winced, eyes fluttering. The experience had been too much.

"Niflheim, what's wrong with her?" Raynor said, startled.

"The heat and noise I think. I need to take her outside and get her some fresh air." Rowan knew the reason why, old memories surfacing to stir trouble.

"You can let her rest in the lobby if you'd like, maybe arrange another time to discuss procurement issues?"

"Another time." Rowan pushed past Raynor and rushed her out. They'd overstayed their welcome.

#

"Ragna, I feel horrible. If I would've known, I wouldn't have asked you to take me," Rowan said.

"It's been some time but I thought I could face my fears. It was too fresh. I wasn't strong enough-"

"-You're very strong, Ragna. One of the strongest women I've met."

"-I just kept seeing my father's face, in agony and dying. It snuck up on me. I just need to sit for a moment then we can go and get you back before anyone notices." Ragna sipped a flowery drink.

Looking to rest, they'd found a quiet alcove inside one of downtown Ny Midgard's more stylish lounges. Young people mingled and talked but paid them little mind. Except the propensity for exotic music and surreal ambience, the lounge reminded Rowan of the pubs near his university, full of laughter, drink, and forgotten worries. He touched a nearby sculpture. Worked from stone, the elongated head looked primitive and out of place among the scintillating tanks and tropical carpets. Its stretched nose and chin held a sturdy face capped by a red top-stone.

"What are these idols? They look ancient."

"They're from the exile islands of Con Tiqui Viracocha -the Heimdall Archipelago and the ancestral home of the True Æsiri," Ragna said.

"What was their purpose?"

"They were built for Tiqui thousands of years ago by the True Æsiri, carved as beacons to call the gods westward over the Stillehavet to repent for their betrayal. Some say Heimdall was the only god to make the voyage and gave birth to the world of men, not Odin. Endless controversy for priests and Edda scholars to sort out."

"And they're just sitting here... as décor, artifacts in a lounge?"

"No," Ragna said, smiling. "These are replicas. Most are preserved in temples, ceremonial totems used by holy men to honor Viracocha and the pantheon. They're rare and ancient but a few still stand in Heimdall." She took another sip of her drink. "You amuse me."

"What?" Her mood had changed.

"You know so little about our traditions and our religion. Besides the Vanir, the Æsiri haven't encountered an outsider for centuries."

The mood was carefree and innocent. Rowan had almost forgotten what it was like. Young men and women glowed with delight. Sacrifice wasn't in their vocabulary, their affluence more powerful than uncertainty. Rowan expected more from a people at war. He closed his eyes and remembered the Muspel sweat-factory a short ride away and the hardship faced by the Mindre at the hands of their Ny Æsiri overlords.

The Muspel laborers were as young as the adolescents around him, no grueling heat, and no menacing guns ready to cut them down at the slightest misstep. All of that had been replaced with ambient lamps and bubbling decorative pools. Had they ever been to Ytter Midgard? Had they looked beyond the Bmur at all? Rowan was disappointed.

"The Mindre Æsiri are outsiders, are they not?"

"Outsiders? I don't understand."

"Don't you find the Mindre's treatment adversarial?" He was careful to phrase his words. "It seems with the energy shortage, sacrifice is left to those outside the Bmur. They're treated like outsiders, serfs in their own homeland. I don't understand. You've all thrown your lot in with theirs, but you treat one another with such weariness. It's like- "

"-It's the way of Midgard. They lack clanblod. They're not direct Æsiri decedents from Heimdall. We're all Viracocha's children, but the Ny Æsiri built Midgard before the Congress of Tyr, before the consolidation of the subsidiaries. Odin blessed us with the mandate to rule the Æsiri lines -even the True Æsiri."

"It may've Odin's consent but it doesn't seem sustainable nor humane. It's not my place but situation's like this lend themselves to fear, anger, and violence."

"What're you trying to say Rowan? That the Mindre colluded with that Vanir saboteur to infiltrate and murder my father? You must know how ridiculous that sounds? If they're the kind of animals that willfully go to slaughter out of pure hatred, then they deserve what they get. Good riddance."

"I'm not saying that at all, Ragna. I'm just saying such disparity invites atrocity. Maybe if it were more egalitarian, the Mindre would've been wearier of an assassin in their midst." He paused. "I didn't mean any harm."

She looked at him and said nothing.

"After my mother passed, I had to work before I could attend university. It was a coalmine in

Warwickshire. My father got me on there as a boiler mechanic -long hours, six days a week, ten hours a day... I barely saw daylight. Young men worked there as loaders, some as young as fourteen-"

"-That's hypocritical Rowan. How can you judge us? We don't allow Æsiri children to work."

"I know. I'm not justifying it -can I continue?"

She nodded, arms crossed.

"Regulations enacted were dismally enforced. The smaller boys were forced to work as hurriers and loaders, towing the loose coal out of the shafts. I was fixing a belt feed when the chain slipped and snagged a lad, maybe fifteen. It pulled him into the hopper. I tried to jam the pulverizer gears with a pry bar, but it was too late. The teeth took hold. In horror, I couldn't look away."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Just listen -That boy's desperate face, frozen eyes, hands warped with rheumatism, clawing the edges of the hopper... I felt nothing but shame. I quit soon afterward. It made me so angry I couldn't explain it. I saw his eyes dim. At the moment of his death, I felt that boy's spirit flow into me like a ghostly ire. It shouldn't have happened; that lad shouldn't have died."

"Anger? -That's it? That's all you felt?"

"No, it was more than that. He was young and why did he sacrifice himself -for money, for someone or something? That boy's life was expendable like some bolt or screw lost from a machine. That child was no one's priority. The company's shareholders deemed his death less a financial risk than giving me what was needed to fix that machine properly. That boy shouldn't have died just like your father shouldn't have died-"

"-My father was murdered, Herr Guthrie, no comparison. There was no amount of reprioritizing anyone could've done to change what happened to him."

"Really?"

Her forehead furrowed. He hesitated. Rowan lowered his eyeshades just enough to catch her in the lounge's full light. Her brown eyes wandered the alcove in an effort to avoid him. He wanted to apologize but couldn't.

A young couple sat down in the booth across from them. Their conversation was inaudible over the din. Rowan could hear them laugh. It was the timeless common language of lovers, no different for this Ny Æsiri couple than it was in his day. Newly weds or an arranged date maybe, it was hard to tell. Ragna finished her drink and looked discreetly in their direction. There was a longing in her eyes and Rowan had a suspicion it was more than just the loss of her father.

"Skjærsild waits."

"Yes, of course," she replied, getting up to leave.

They'd been noticed.

[TD] CHAPTER SEVEN

It was overcast. A morning drizzle had left the promenade wet. There was no blindfold -he'd made his decision, he was to greet fate with open eyes. Everything was illusory -the faces in formation, the witness stand, and Lt. Colonel Jenkins grimacing as he sat on his mount in parade uniform. They were set pieces in a play, a stage occupied by no one but Lt. Captain Rowan Guthrie, a traitor to his army and Mother Britain.

Their investigations were inconclusive. They couldn't find a modus operandi or a rationale for why a decorated officer had sold his homeland to the German hordes. In apprehending Rowan, they'd captured Hun liaison officer, Lt. Asperheim. But he'd managed to swallow cyanide before interrogation. As much as they promised Rowan leniency, he gave up nothing except a few intercepted Bosch communiqués. But with that, they'd convicted him, accused of selling his country and the lives of British soldiers for profit, a crime of high treason.

The chaplain walked beside him, last rights conjured from a rosary and a tattered King James. Dread dissolved into abstract notions. There was no sobbing, no groveling or humiliation, and no single minded-ness to cripple his dignity.

The drum corps' tom-toms echoed through the morning air interrupted only by a murder of crows squawking and picking grit from the sandbag barricade. The firing post was pedestrian, a featureless placeholder for the last seconds of a

condemned life, no divots of shredded pine or dried blood.

"Yea though I walk through the valley of death, I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me-"

"-Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me," Rowan interrupted. The Psalm was stuck in his mind, but he was unsure why.

"You're strong my son. Your courage gives your family strength," the old man said. They shuffled across the parade field's damp gravel. The drum rolled louder with each step as the minutes counted down.

"Where are they?"

"-Home. The newspapers will deliver the news. But there is a personal witness on your behalf. "

Rowan searched the crowd. Witnesses were cordoned behind a regimental formation. He saw the newspaperman busily writing the details of his imminent demise as war photographers framed the firing line to insure proper light. And behind them, he saw her. It was Anna. His chest weighed heavy as his breath quickened, steamy in the cold air. The malaise of doom gave way to an urge to catch a glimpse of her.

"I need to see her," Rowan said. "I have to ask her why."

"Why, is a question only the Lord Almighty knows-"

"-Enough!" Rowan snarled with eyes glaring. "Let me speak to my fiancé. This won't take long."

"I'll see what can be done."

The chaplain picked up the hem of his robe and hurried off. Rowan dug deep for a Pall Mall. The metal cuffs made it difficult but he fumbled the fag to his lips, dropping his flint in the process. A soldier picked it up and lit it as

another soldier tied him to the center post. Again, they offered him the blindfold. He shook his head and dismissed them both.

"Lt. Captain Rowan Aidan Guthrie stands before us convicted of collusion with the enemy. For these crimes, His Majesties 242nd has sentenced him to death," a squad sergeant read.

The ember of his cigarette fell away as she approached. Something was different; she'd changed. Her eyes were withdrawn and her face lacked color, dulled by leaden skies. A wool cape hid her figure, its hood holding back her amber hair, a few locks wet against her cheek. He wanted to reach out, touch her, and feel her warmth. The urge built like a fire inside as he tried unsuccessfully to wiggle his hands free.

"Rowan," she said, her head cocked like a doting mother. Her eyes were half-moons. "I've tried to understand this but I can't-"

"-When I received your letter, I just wanted to end it," Rowan said, eyes darting as he soaked in her every tear.

"You betrayed your country because of me? Rowan Aidan, you cannot go to your death spiting Graham and I -selfishly blaming us for your death." Her voice was clinical and distant.

"Graham?" Rowan smirked. "Is he an adequate lover?"

"-Don't." She reached for his mouth.

"Queer, I don't remember committing treason. I wouldn't even know how to ring up one of those Hun bastards. Some sniper's bullet, a blood soaked ditch or this post -the outcome's the same... death." Rowan paused, smiling. "My fate was sealed the day that bloke dropped off the Royal Mail."

"You talk like I'd no faith," she said, eyes welling with tears. "I always believed in you."

"Then why didn't you trust me to come back?"

"-Because of something like this."

"Prescience doesn't become you, Anna. The world's put together in a chain of chance, and to know its many paths is to know the face of God-"

"Don't blaspheme. It's not good for your soul." She reached out and touched his chest. He looked down at her soft hand against the filthy wool of his uniform, rank and ribbons torn away by the court. "You chose this for yourself."

"I don't believe I did."

"You're making no sense."

"We can still be together. I'll survive this-"

She shrieked. "You're mad! Stop it!" she sobbed.

"Come back, love. You have to believe me!"

A soldier stepped in and escorted her away, her sobs growing fainter with every step. The master sergeant ordered the firing squad in, young lads with twitchy faces. They loaded a single cartridge into their Enfields and stood at the ready. There were seven Tommies to carry out the execution, four with a bullet and three with blanks, all standard protocol. To kill a comrade -even a traitor in wartime- was a burden the brass wanted no Tommy to hassle themselves with.

Lt. Colonel Jenkins trotted up and dismounted. He wore his spotless riding boots with starched knickers neatly tucked in. Rowan looked at them, reflecting the motion of his walk. He paced, trying to find the right words. Jenkins was never one for emotion, but when it came to questions of country and honor, he couched his words cautiously.

"Enough! There's a good gentleman. You'll just make it the more difficult. Do you have a message for your family back home?"

"No sir. But let me say, despite the courts marshal, I believe myself to be innocent of these crimes. I would never dishonor my men in such scandalous fashion."

"Commandant Asperheim, a Bosch field officer commanding a tattered battalion, was captured at the Scheldt River, December 19, 1917. In his possession were British codes and communiqués delivered by a one Lt. Captain Rowan Guthrie. They transmitted that information and used it to infiltrate and destroy Audenarde, committing atrocities against Belgian refugees not seen since this war's start."

"-Not true." Rowan whispered.

"I'm afraid so, Lt. Guthrie. Right brutal bastards they were -priests tied head down to the church bell's clapper, women raped, breasts cut from them, children bayoneted and appendages amputated for amusement..."

"-No more poison." Rowan yelled. "On with it!"

"Lt. captain, justice must be served. I suggest you make peace with your crimes and ask the Lord for forgiveness. Time will forget your disgrace, but your soul will not. Die well."

Jenkins nodded and marched off.

"Ready!" The squad sergeant yelled. "Aim!"

Rowan looked skyward at the crows waiting for blood to ebb from his wounds like uncorked molasses. Time slowed. Breath sealed his ears, softening sound to a quiet ring.

"Fire!"

Four thumps popped his chest, throwing his chin to his throat. Blood poured from bony craters in

his sternum as his legs pigeon-toed and buckled. He closed his eyes but found thought hadn't drifted into the black. He wasn't dead; he would not die. Soggy eyes looked up at the master sergeant's approaching feet. A wet hand grabbed hold and pushed his head to the post.

"Bloody hell!" There was a flash of horror in the sergeant's eyes. "Impossible!"

"Not impossible," Rowan gurgled.

He awoke.

Greasy fluid covered his fingertips. The overdose purge had spilt the soveaske from the chest reservoir. He'd been unable to resist it. He looked down and saw the empty container kicked underneath the table. The reaction was sudden and quick, locking him into a sleep cycle before he could stumble to bed.

Tormod had told him the dreams were figments of a phantasmal mind. Like the sensations of a lost limb, the re-engineering of his brain filled the gaps lost by the living counterpart. It was Tormod's pet theory, something he'd mathematically modeled but never observed.

Struggling to hold onto the fading dream, he bobbed the vaporous images. He picked up Anna's picture to coax himself, grasping at whatever he could. He remembered the firing squad. She was there. He was angry with her but didn't know particularly why. He'd said something wicked. Whatever it was, the words made her cry. His mind failed to rebuild the lost dream.

Rubbing the fluid from his hands, he noticed his skin was darker. The interwoven webbing had expanded from his joints, enveloping his flesh into a durable and flexible hide as the cellemaskin sorcery worked double-time.

He picked up his field knife, opened the blade and poked the stub of his finger. Soft at first, he made a few weak slashes and noticed the skin tighten. The transformation continued but for what end, he wasn't sure. A few more stiff slashes and still nothing. His knuckles looked supple but a meshed armor had wrapped the epidermal like callus.

"What am I?"

His revived corpse was building itself from the Skjærsild microscopic blueprints, worker bees lurking at cellular level turning his corpse into an organic superstructure. He looked at his reflection in the blade.

"I've got to wake up," he mumbled.

#

The rusty orb spun above the display like a movie projector. He hunched closer for a better look. It was intricate. Rugged canyons and highlands dotted the surface like a geological survey. He remembered nothing like it. Sverre slowed the rotation speed. Rowan remembered the globes hidden away in the university's library, but none were this vivid. It looked like a mosaic of reconnaissance photographs stitched into a planet-sized montage. Brilliant.

Rowan walked around the spinning sphere. It lacked the Moon's silvery hue but was similarly pocked with craters. Like Earth, its poles were capped with white. Another planet and another world he knew nothing about. A massive continental scar warped the surface dotted with pinpricks like stars. He looked closer at the loose network of lights ringing the base of vast calderas. The resolution was too poor to see much.

"What am I looking at?" Rowan asked.

"Asgard, the home of the Æsir pantheon and Odin's Hall, Valhalla, where the Ny Æsiri Einherjar fight on eternal," Sverre said. He sat down at his desk and toggled a nearby panel. The globe slowed and stopped.

"Asgard's an actual place?" Rowan was incredulous.

"Of course. What did you think?" Sverre smirked.

"I thought it was some religious notion, like Heaven... not sure."

"Come with me."

Sverre got up and walked over to an observation window. Nightfall had descended on Midgard leaving the horizon dim. The snow-heavy clouds had cleared to reveal stars twinkling in the frigid sky. "There, just above the ocean." He pointed at a large red glimmer. Rowan's eyes dilated to capture more light.

"Mars?"

"-Mars -Aries, a place of many names. The Ny Æsiri call it Asgard," Sverre said.

"-And you're able to cross to it."

"The Ny Æsiri are seafarers, always have been."

Rowan was acutely reminded of his crippling ignorance. There was so much to know about the Ny Æsiri. Wonders and horrors never ceased. Like a paper sack full of water, feeble notions burst and dissolved.

"Asgard's home of the dysterfolk Einherjar. Like our ancestors, fallen warriors cross Bifrost to Valgrind and enter Odin's hall where they live to fight another day."

Rowan nodded, dumbstruck.

"Without Skjærsild, our people would be at the mercy of Fimbulwinter and Ragnarok, victims of prophecy. Asgard is our hope."

"Dysterfolk as soldiers," Rowan said in disbelief.

"Night's approaching. There's something else I want to show you," Sverre said, turning south. "Look there, crawling the coast on the northern current."

Rowan thought the low lying clouds were patches of fog at first but soon realized the ocean was filled with icebergs, spread over the dark water like grazing sheep.

"So much ice."

"It ebbs and flows depending on the day. Some years the shore's completely iced over, lingering longer into spring. Soon, Fimbulwinter will take hold of Midgard entirely." Sverre was serious. His jaw muscles flexed. He turned and toggled the display. The Asgard map dissolved, replaced by a frosted globe dotted with blue.

"What's this?"

"Yggdrasil," Sverre said. "Mother Earth,"

Rowan was stupefied. It was a world as different to him as the world of the living. He scoured the shorelines and continents looking for anything recognizable. He tried to find Britain but got lost in a rambling map of sea-pocked ice. He didn't know where to start. Like meaty claws, ice sheets gripped both poles covering everything not submerged by vast nebulous ocean.

"I don't believe it."

"Lush landscapes cling to life in the tropics. Vent fed currents nurture what remains. The world is cooling. And to complicate matters, Stillehavet's batholithic vents are receding into the sea floor. With no food or energy, Midgard and the Æsiri won't survive. Fimbulwinter is forcing exodus-"

"-To Asgard," Rowan completed the thought. "No water, no air, oxidized desert, never ending dust-"

"-Only dysterfolk can survive Asgard now but Surtur has discovered vast thermal reserves. The Tharsis Montes Plateau is home to active vents and energy that could support the Æsiri people indefinitely."

"So you're going to migrate everyone to Midgard." Rowan said.

"Everyone?" Sverre paused then took a few nervous steps back.

"All of Midgard, Ytter Midgard included. I'm sure the Tyrians have plans to evacuate the Mindre Æsiri as well."

Sverre walked back to his desk and poured a glass of water, sweat beading on his brow. He was anxious and careful of his words.

"Yes, all the Æsiri will cross Bifrost, but Asgard is highly contested."

"How could such a far-flung realm be contested?"

"Loki's laid siege to Tharsis Montes. Ragnarok's begun and our enemies, the Vanir, are intent on destroying Valhalla. Vanaheim will reign if the Ny Æsiri can't secure the Surtur vents. The descendents of the Ny Æsiri -the immigrant Lifthrasiri- won't survive the world they inherit unless we defeat the Vanir," Sverre explained.

"The Vanir... on Asgard?" He almost laughed. It seemed ludicrous. "I've seen them -half-starved partisans- you're telling me these buggers can muster an army a world away?"

Details were in short supply. Like most Æsiri, Sverre dedicated himself to conforming the world's realities to fit uncompromising axioms. It wasn't just Sverre but the whole elite of Ny Midgard.

Their Vanir enemies were faceless, assigned a tenuous wickedness. This, with their zealous adherence to myth, cast morality into stark shades of good and evil, black and white that mocked doubt.

"We've destroyed their communication hub on Asgard and jammed their receivers, but hijacked signals occasionally make it through on downlink."

Rowan looked out the window at the crimson pinprick and remembered the data crystal dangling round his neck. Tormod had told him it was the imprint of a highly suspect communiqué. Whether it belonged to the enemy or not, Rowan wasn't sure. He was sure, however, that the Vanir had found it important enough to risk their lives to recover it. He kept it close and avoided mentioning it. If the Ny Æsiri were allowed their secrets, Rowan felt obliged to his.

"It's a new tactic. We think they're coordinating the Ytter-Midgard Vanir. We're unable to decode the intercepted communiqués -probably just simple messages- but we believe they're getting more advanced. It's getting difficult to predict the enemy's next move and their tactics grow more lethal."

Rowan walked over and sat down. The room's synthetic light grayed Sverre's gaunt complexion. There was an anxious energy stirring in him like the accused awaiting the verdict.

"Herr Berjon." Rowan smiled, lips closed. Sverre sat anxiously with folded hands. "A thousand years haven't dulled my wits to where I'm unable to read the writing on the wall; you've reincarnated me for a purpose, one single design, true?"

Sverre eagerly leaned forward. "Humanity's at a bottleneck -the finale of the Holocene Extinction

Event. Viracocha has saddled the Ny Æsiri with the honor of Earth's last civilized race. It's a heavy burden. We mustn't fail. Look out there," Sverre said, pointing at the flickering skyline. "Midgard's the last city and it's besieged. On behalf of the Tyrians and all of humanity, we beg your assistance."

"I'm no Hessian. I can't just-"

"-Mercenary's fight for greed, soldiers fight for belief because they know there's no other choice. They fight for their homeland and things greater than themselves."

"And you believe there's no other choice, the Vanir must be destroyed."

Sverre nodded.

"What's their grievance, their politics? Perhaps they think themselves patriots."

"Patriotism and murder are mutually exclusive. The Vanir are humanity's suicidal despondency - finding pleasure in our demise, sacrificing to the wicked gods, Loki, the Fenris, Hel herself... They're saturated with hatred like an incurable sickness." Sverre sat back in his chair and calmly ran his hands through his hair.

"What am I going to offer the Æsiri? I was a soldier, true, a commanding officer, but-"

"-A decorated lieutenant-," Sverre interjected.

"-But my soldiering skills don't meet snuff. They're far eclipsed by Sigurd's legionnaires. Their tactics are impossibly advanced -urban combat, specialized logistics... I'd be no use other than a mascot. I'd be as good as a Roman praetorian on a Vickers, a buffoon."

"Asgard's full of revelation. You'd be shocked how necessary your flavor of soldiering is to us."

Rowan hesitated, looked away, and gazed out the window.

"And what if I agree to it?"

"You'll cross Bifrost and serve with the 3rd Wave, command Suncasapa legionnaires -the kuld-soldat Lifthrasir- your own army..."

Rowan pulled the chain from underneath his shirt and gazed at Anna's ring and the data mesh. Sverre watched confused but said nothing. Thought agitated him. If certainty was the end result, there was something to Sverre's proposition, anything to shape the chaos of his limbo existence. He pulled the mesh from the data crystal and compared it to the diamond. Both encrypted with information of sorts, they bled into each other through a thousand year rift. Something moved inside his heart unexplained, a need to do something. He pushed the chain back into his shirt and paced. The gears started to unstick. There was a mandate, a mission, and he was a soldier.

"I'll do it."

Awkward silence.

"I'm relieved," Sverre sighed. "You're quite the celebrity in Ny Midgard. The news has circulated and risking so much to bring you to us, Skjærsild was concerned our proposition might be misconstrued."

"Risking your career you mean. Worried I'd be a dud?"

He'd spotted Sverre as an opportunist. Sverre Berjon was a middleman for a higher authority. He was loyal to his subsidiary, tying his success to its success. Rowan accepted it and could hardly resent him. A company man had to do what he had to do.

"That's not what I meant." Sverre was nervous. "I've grown fond of our rapport, haven't you? I've taken this project very personally, so much so that I've passed up promotion to insure your case was handled with extreme care."

"I didn't mean to insult," Rowan said. "I appreciate it. I do."

"It's done then," Sverre reached into his desk and took out a small case from a drawer. He pulled out what looked like a cigarette and handed it Rowan.

"Thanks," Rowan said, confused.

"Tormod concocted one of these from a seaweed enrichment process, an organic fuel variant." He leaned in with a small torch. Rowan forced his lungs to inhale a few puffs. Lights danced in his periphery as blue smoke poured out his nose. A brief shot of energy followed. It wasn't hydrokraft, but it satisfied similar cravings. He smoked it down.

"Interesting," Rowan remarked, "thank you."

"It's nothing, just a little historical research. Were you fond of cigarettes?"

"Too much for my fiancé's liking," Rowan said. "Can you switch the display back to Asgard?"

The red globe rematerialized. Questions surfaced like bubbles from a sinking wreck. He was to be a part of a third wave, but what of the first, and the second? Had they failed or been defeated? Who were they? He tried to picture them, abandoned soldiers, looking up from the scarred rusty planet begging him. He knew the faces of the forgotten. He remembered their eyes gazing back at him through the soapy mirror of his shaving kit, all those years ago.

#

The soldier shifted uneasily, on edge and preoccupied. He was aloof but Rowan saw him peeking out the corners of his eye. Ragna inserted the catheter into Rowan's wrist and cycled the portable filtering unit. This session was going to be a different, something new. Ragna was going to ask a series of questions in order to fine-tune the cellemaskin. Skjærsild was concerned about Rowan's emotional capacity for military indoctrination. He obliged them but hadn't a clue what to expect.

"Again Rowan, you're going to have to remove the glasses and extinguish whatever that is you're inhaling." His fiddling agitated her.

"You ever smoked a coffin nail?"

"Smoke? Is that what you call what you're doing? No, I haven't. I've never seen such a thing."

The intoxicating affects waned, but it felt good to bellow his lungs, however artificial. He couldn't smell the aroma, but his exhales sent Ragna into sneezing fits. He pulled the fag from his lips and extinguished it in an empty glass.

"It's not a Pall Mall, but I wouldn't be able to taste the tobacco anyhow." Rowan's eyes wandered over to the legionnaire, "What's he doing here?"

"Why don't you ask him yourself?" Ragna said, looking up from the coupler monitor.

"Soldier, you have a name?"

"Menig Thorsdatter, sir."

"Menig, Ragna and I are fully capable of this exercise on our own," Rowan coaxed.

"The kommandants have requested I deliver this reprogramming regiment personally and insure it is administered properly, sir."

"Any kommandant in particular?" Rowan asked.

"Kdt. Asperheim, sir."

"Hear that Ragna, Sigurd sends his regards,"

"Sigurd doesn't trust me, never has."

"Why wouldn't he?-"

"-Sit back, I need to align the eye coupler."

Ragna ignored him and dimmed the hosloft's lights. A flickering cone of blue intensity saturated his retinas, forcing him back in his seat. Touch, taste, and smell had been eclipsed by heightened awareness of sight and sound, five senses honed into two. Black svartblod, slow at first, flowed into his rigid veins. The fluid rushed into his head like a river. The cellemaskin heated as the tuner engaged, warming the dried saliva that dribbled from his metal teeth. Embarrassed, he wiped the drool onto a sleeve cuff.

The menig inserted something into the filter's monitor and the screen sprung to life. Ragna nodded as Thorsdatter whispered into her ear. Words and symbols flashed on the screen.

"Rowan, I'm going to start the questions," she explained. "Try to answer them truthfully-"

"-It helps the cellemaskin tuning the more accurate your responses," Thorsdatter interrupted.

Ragna looked annoyed. Her clout wasn't about to be subverted by just anyone. It was something Rowan had grown to appreciate about Ragna, her strong personality. The menig took notice and stepped back.

"First question. Is there an appropriate time to implement unconventional weaponry?-"

"-Is the machine going now?-"

"-Yes, Rowan, please answer."

"Indiscriminate warfare?" Rowan paused. "I suppose. It depends on the circumstances. Mustard gas for instance... um," Rowan struggled to explain.

"Next question-"

"-If you'll allow me to elaborate."

"Not needed. Next question-"

"-If you must-"

"-Is torture a viable means of interrogation or counterproductive?" Ragna was nervous.

"Counterproductive? I would imagine yes, depending on the detainee and the circumstances. If men's lives depend on it, I could see austere coercion as reasonable only if-"

"-Next question-"

"-I can elaborate-"

"-Next question. Is there ever an appropriate time to massacre civilians?"

"Appropriate? I should say not."

"Continue."

"It happens from time to time, rogue officers not properly disciplined. Usually lieutenants guilty of turning a gun on civilian sympathizers, nasty business that-"

"-Next question-"

"-Ragna, hold on one moment-"

"-Rowan, we need to complete this in a timely manner," she said, exasperated.

Rowan sighed. He was frustrated with the exercise. The coupler's beam flashed as he spoke, making concentration difficult. They were serious questions, but Ragna's clinical speed trivialized them.

"Next question then. On with it," Rowan capitulated.

"Have you ever used violence to prove to someone they were wrong about you?"

"Knew a few Alleyemen who were wrong about me, but I suppose that's not what the question's asking." Rowan was flummoxed. "When I worked the

coal mines, I used to scrap down at the public house, bunch of hooligans. That lot never knew me enough to have an opinion. Just ruffians mixing it up."

Ragna looked up from the monitor, concerned. She could tell he was irritable. The questions stopped. After a silent minute, she dismissed Thorsdatter. Under threat of some unnamed authority, the menig protested but was soon shown the door. She paced and gazed out the window, looking away as she talked.

"I apologize if you're uncomfortable, but the questions are necessary."

"Necessary? I'm not sure how I should answer them, but that doesn't seem to be the point, is it?"

"It's not the point. So don't ask," Ragna said, wiping her cheeks. He saw no tears but knew she was upset. "I'm just following orders."

"Sigurd's orders." His voice trembled. "On with it then. I don't mind. It's something you have to do." Her eyes glistened. She was fear-ridden, an unseen river of worry flowed through her. "I don't mind," he repeated. She wrung her hands and sat back at the filtering unit.

"Are sexual relations inherently violent?"

"Bloody Hell," Rowan exclaimed, taken aback. He paused, gathering himself to get on with it. "Suppose it's not possible to skip that one?"

She shook her head, struggling. "The tuning is iterative, each question dependent on the last. The system log will void the session. Please Rowan-"

"-Alright then. I'll give it my best go. They're asking about rape?"

Ragna shrugged.

"I'd suppose for the most part, no, of course not. Violence and sex have been misconstrued since civilization began, Visigoths, Mongols used it as a way to infiltrate and conquer populations from the inside out. In my experience, a few Tommies would get rough with local French whores but nothing deserving of courts marshal, a symptom of violence really, not the cause of it. Did the machine take my answer?"

Ragna nodded. "There's a meter on the monitor, when it saturates the questions cycle."

The light modulated incoherently. His rambling answers were fed to the tuning mechanism used to throw microscopic switches deep within. The questions reminded him of British military psychological assessments, test used by field doctors to weigh a soldier's aptitude for combat leadership. But this was different. As he considered each question, his brain shifted like a shell-shocked bugger. He could feel it. Moods fluctuated, attempting to find balance in the half-awake stupor.

"Has there ever been a time when you've wished death over loneliness?"

"Death over loneliness," Rowan grinned. "Bit late for that one." He tried to make her smile. She was having none of it.

"When you were alive," Ragna said.

"I've never been suicidal, although there's been times..." Rowan trailed off, thinking about the answer.

"Rowan, please-"

"I remember her face from the train window. I've never been one for superstition or premonition, but I knew, deep in my heart, I'd never see her again like a logic that betrayed reason. It was

the loneliest moment in my life, watching her face blurred by the crowd as I headed off for war. It felt like death." He said nothing for a few moments.

"The meter saturated. Are you ready for the next question?"

"Go ahead."

"Have you ever desired sexual relations with someone you despised?"

"Ragna, no," Rowan answered, shocked. "Who'd think of such a question?"

"The tuner needs more input, continue."

"Ragna. Is this testing my perversions?"

"I'm not a Skjærsild scientist. Answer best you can."

"Consensual relations then?" he asked.

"It would seem," Ragna replied.

"Of course not. I don't give myself lightly, especially to someone I don't respect. I couldn't imagine a situation... but having the favor returned in kind? I suppose, perhaps someone who wanted to take something from a person and treat it with neglect, a possible a way to get back at them for perceived wrongs. -I don't mean to ramble. Did it take?"

Ragna looked up from the flicker of the monitor. He pulled away from the coupler and looked at her. Her eyes lacked the usual distance, that look of contempt she reserved for Sigurd and the likes of Skjærsild's bureaucrats. Somewhere in between the world of the undead and the living, they'd touched common ground.

"Next question-"

"Next question," Rowan repeated.

"Have you ever felt guilt for feeling elated at having killed?"

He shook his head. "Elated?" Rowan hunkered down and thought about it. "I never much liked the business of killing. First time I killed the enemy, I felt sick, real violent-like. It was wretched, but with matters of survival the choice was brutally simple. The poor bastard didn't go down swiftly. Rolled around with gut shot until I got a beat with the Enfield. A couple more 'pops' to his brain-case -I can still see it. Afterward, it felt bittersweet. One less Bosch to bury my lads."

The coupler modulated color, recombining into stark pinks and greens that swamped his filters. His eye-sockets heated as viscous amber fluid poured from his nostrils. There were images of war and devastation. He saw himself, like a wild animal, dashing through the torn up slums of Ytter-Midgard as he chased the living. His fingers twitched, clawing at the sofa cushions like talons. He bellowed as he strained from the fit.

"Rowan?"

More moaning.

"Rowan, say something."

There was a knock. Ragna shut off the filtering unit and got up to answer it. Swirling tracers dissolved from his eyes as he shook off the spasm. A wedge of light broke into the room. Menig Thorsdatter and another soldier stood outside the open door, their voices quiet. Rowan tuned his ears to listen.

"How much longer?"

"Why?" Ragna said, annoyed.

"Preparations are underway for Forst Fodt-" Menig Thorsdatter replied.

"Heimdall, then Bifrost -I know."

"Sigurd wants you to accompany him. Preparations are to be made tomorrow. The hosloft and Rowan's personal affects will be shipped along with the Skjærsild contingent. Understood, Frue Fjoren?"

"Whatever Sigurd wishes, Sigurd gets."

"How goes the tuning?"

"Better now that there's less interruption," a swipe at the overeager menig.

"It's all under control then? The special programming administered as requested?"

"Yes Thorsdatter, everything's under control. Why wouldn't it be?"

"Just make sure he's ready to disembark. Sigurd wishes him to review his legion's detachments prior to leaving."

Ragna closed the door. Rowan clicked the torch and lit another cigarette. The wiry strands of smoke drifted up through the aquamarine of the coupler beam. It didn't burn like any Pall Mall he remembered. It was more delicate, like Jenkins' pipe tobacco. He leaned back and relaxed. She sat down, exhausted.

"Why do you feel the need to smoke those?" she asked.

"Ritual of the habit, nostalgia, a piece of home... What does it smell like to you?"

"It's not terrible. It smells a bit like incense, driftwood, sea salt -holy man stuff."

"Wish I could smell again. Damn fine sense. I apologize if it's irritating."

Ragna pinched her face and shook her head.

"I overheard. We're leaving Midgard?"

"To the Heimdall Archipelago, Bifrost, the rainbow bridge to Asgard."

"Asgard," Rowan mumbled, puffing his cigarette.

"Your Lifthrasir Corp isn't ready, so we'll be traveling to the island of Forst Fodt first, the Ny Æsiri Holy Land. Some Edda scholars believe it's where Heimdall gave birth to the Æsiri. Other's believe Odin and Frigga born the Æsiri in Midgard-"

"-I see-"

"-Sectarian debates of the Con Tiqui devout, not my expertise," she said, smiling uncomfortably.

"Have you been there?"

"No. The wealthy make pilgrimages, but most Ny Æsiri need Tyrian sponsors to travel there. Besides Midgard, the archipelago is the only place on Earth where True Æsiri live in any number. The Tyrians are highly protective of it."

"Places of reverence must be handled with special care, I know, like Allenby at Jerusalem."

"Remember the lounge and the stone heads?"

Rowan nodded, remembering the idols hidden among flower garlands and wistful adolescents.

"The island's dotted with artifacts."

"I see."

"Specialized preparations will be made on Forst Fodt for the crossing, preparations the Congress of Tyr have mandated, more training and more conditioning," she explained.

Rowan shrugged ignorant. Whatever voodoo they'd in store for him would remain a mystery. "Can I ask you a personal question?" he asked, flicking ash from the cigarette.

She nodded.

"Did you and Sigurd have personal history prior to Skjærsild?"

She sighed then nodded. "After my father died, he found me work here." She paused. "If you don't mind, I'd rather not discuss it right now."

Rowan nodded.

"Are there more questions then?" he asked, putting out his cigarette.

"Not today." She unplugged the power from the portable filtering unit. "Enough questions for now."

[TD] CHAPTER EIGHT

He was dressed in the parade shielding of the Liftrhasir kuld-soldat legions. Kommandant R.A. Guthrie was embroidered into the chest-weave, the cryptic phonetic symbols of the Ny Æsiri alphabet declaring his rank and status. He felt uncomfortable in the uniform. It felt shameful to have deserted the His Majesty's greyback for another's army.

Despite the armor's pomp and flare, the hydrokraft pumps and circulators stayed hooked to the svartblod exchangers, working to maintain Skikk indefinitely. Like a tortoise shell, the shielding could never be removed once he reached Asgard. He didn't understand why but was told of 'runaway distension'. Whatever it was, it sounded awful.

"You look ready," Sverre said, enthusiastically.

The elevator door slid open and they stepped out onto the tarmac of Ny Midgard's military skyport. The sun was low as winds pushed an afternoon snow squall into the eastern peaks. He threw on his eyeshades and looked out at the massive airships sitting idle. The vessels were awesomely tall, competing with the skyline of Ny Midgard's subsidiaries.

"Hard to miss, aren't they?" Rowan said.

"The diomedea carryalls. They're the Ny Æsiri's lifeblood, our only artery to the rest of the world. Without them, Heimdall would wither. We wouldn't be able to explore and exploit thermal vents. Additionally, without them, we would've never found you. Whether you know it or not,

you've ridden halfway around the world in the belly of a diomedea," Sverre explained.

Rowan looked at them. They were like no vehicles he'd ever seen. Huge narrow wings stood upright hinged to a large insect-like carapace below. Their elegance betrayed their size. Hundreds of meters tall and decameters in length, the machines' ability to fly seemed dubious. Teardrop dirigibles clung to their hulls via taut umbilicals as the landing gear strained to anchor the vehicles to the deck.

"The Suncasapa are ready for inspection."

"Ragna, come please," Rowan said.

She lingered at the threshold of the elevator door. He grew anxious when she wasn't close. Midgard's holy men had assembled to bless the legion with Jotenheim's glacial waters. Dressed in ceremonial animal hides, they paced the formations, flicking droplets onto the undead. Guttural chants of archaic poetry vibrated in their throats. Rowan didn't know the words but guessed them to be passages from The Edda, spoken in the cryptic tongue of their Æsiri ancestors. The sheer numbers of the kuld-soldat surprised him. There were more than he bothered to count, hundreds, maybe thousands.

"Lifthrasir Corp is only partially assembled. By the time you depart Forst Fodt, the corp will be complete and prepared for the crossing to Asgard," Sverre said, gesticulating.

"There're so many. Are they all veterans?" Rowan asked, astonished.

"Yes, valiant warriors in life, they died with honor. Not to worry Kdt. Guthrie, the proving grounds of Bifrost will give you the opportunity to train them as you see fit and get you familiar

with commanding undead -hydrokraft management and tactics, that sort of thing. We trust you with the Skjærsild's kuld-soldat elite."

From the sea of gunmetal faces, one stood out. Underneath the shaded brim of a legionnaire helmet, Rowan recognized Menig Bahuus staring vacantly ahead. He was dysterfolk now. The katedral's work finished. He remembered him from the mekriger in Ytter-Midgard and Skjærsild, his tattoos fresh and few. But now, boyhood had dissolved completely, leaving behind a hardened empty face.

"Menig Bahuus, I saw him after Skikk. I said a prayer for him after he was killed in Ytter-Midgard," Rowan said.

"I wasn't aware," Sverre said surprised. "He's an Overbetjent now, no longer a Menig."

Rowan walked up to the formation. He looked into Bahuus' eyes. Sverre was correct. He'd been promoted in rank, suggested by the dim glow of his shoulder-armor's chevrons. Rowan grabbed hold of the overbetjent's shielding and inspected the markings. It was the standard of the Suncasapa Lifthrasir Legion and his designated battalion, a fiery hammer on a diamond field of blue.

Once reanimated, the Ny Æsiri dysterfolk swapped their ancestral tattoos for more exotic phosphorescent embroidery, woven calligraphy molded to the natural curves of the corpse shielding. War tattooing didn't work for the undead. Their skin was impenetrable to the prick of an ink-needle, too callous and leathery.

"Overbetjent? In my day I would've called you 'master sergeant'," Rowan said. "What's your full name, soldier?"

"Erik Bahuus, sir."

"I was with you in the mekriger during the ambush. Do you remember? I prayed for you while the combat technicians prepared your body. I was with you after Skikk at the Skjærsild katedral."

"Yes sir, Kommandant, sir," Bahuus replied. "I don't remember, but I do remember you in the mekriger with Kdt. Asperheim. Skikk has taken much but some memory remains."

"Have you been assigned a detachment, overbetjent?"

"No Sir. They're waiting for you to deploy the legion when we've all arrived on Bifrost."

"I need an exceptional master sergeant. During my service in the Great War--"

"-I know about your battle with the Huns," the overbetjent interrupted.

"You do?"

"I've heard a lot about you on the bulletins. You're a quick study in legend, Kdt. Guthrie. They say without your battlefield prescience in the Eurasian wars, the Western-Anglo Empires may've fallen and the world would've been very different. Some think the Ny Æsiri wouldn't exist at all, if it weren't for you." Bahuus was eager to impress.

Rowan took a few uncomfortable steps back and wondered what in God's name they'd been telling the Ny Æsiri about his past. They'd morphed him into some overblown exaggerated hero, propaganda. He felt ashamed.

"We're all soldiers, overbetjent. We do what we're ordered. I'd expect no different from anyone under my command, especially a master sergeant. Would you be up to it?"

He didn't know much about Menig Bahuus other than the circumstances of his death, but it didn't matter. There was something about him Rowan

identified with. Other dysterfolk were sure to be more combat experienced, but seeing the Skikk process firsthand, the man's death to rebirth, brought Rowan's fate closer. There was a piece of him in the overbetjent's black pupil-less eyes.

"Of course," Ojt. Bahuus said.

"It's done then."

Rowan noticed the overbetjent's battle order, his lung-gun slung against his chest plating. He looked down and saw the shielding's siphon attached to the weapon's reactive chamber, coupling it to the chest's svartblod exchangers.

"Is something wrong?" He noticed Rowan staring.

"I haven't seen it rigged in that fashion. You're sharing hydrokraft. The gun shares your energy?"

"Skjærsild has configured it for Asgard. The lung-gun's more efficient this way. It breaths with me--"

"Of course... It's a lung-gun."

It was symbiosis of man and machine, some new form of magic. Rowan was dumbfounded. The weapon was a parasite, protecting its host while feeding from the vitals. Skjærsild engineers had left nothing to waste when it came to perfecting the kuld-soldat's efficient lethality. Like a Swiss watch, dysterfolk were finely tuned clockwork.

"Inspecting your battalions?" Sverre walked up behind him.

"My battalions?"

"Of course!" Sverre exclaimed. "It looks like you're establishing your command already."

"This is Ojt. Erik Bahuus, my new master sergeant," Bahuus stood at attention, giving Sverre a swift nod.

"If you'll excuse us, overbetjent. Herr Kommandant and I must take leave. We've matters to tend to before departure." Sverre turned to leave.

"Overbetjent?" Rowan paused, turning.

"Yes, Kdt. Guthrie!"

"I'll see you on Bifrost," Rowan said. He didn't know what to expect when he arrived, but a familiar face couldn't hurt. Anything familiar was good.

"Yes, Herr Kommandant. Gjer Raest, Frykt Ingen!" Bahuus shouted.

"Gjer Raest, Frykt Ingen. Do right, Fear No One."

"You've learned much, Kdt. Guthrie. I'm honored to serve you."

"Goodbye, overbetjent."

"Sir!"

Ragna rejoined them as Sverre led them across the tarmac to the diomedea. A group of Skjærsild technicians gathered near the vehicle's gangway. They were busy tending to a withered man sitting in a hovering tendril chair, tubes and life support swarming his slumped body. A technician leaned in and whispered something into the man's ear as he looked up with bloodshot eyes.

"Sigurd!"

Ragna shrieked at the sight of him. Afraid, she cowered behind Rowan to hide from the foul spectacle. The illness had progressed, altering him into a half-paralyzed invalid. His lips quivered as sunken eyes shifted erratically. He was on death's doorstep, life leaving him with every soggy breath.

"Herr Guthrie," Sigurd murmured.

"A turn for the worse since Ytter-Midgard, my sympathies. You look like hell."

"My hygiene's lacking lately, I'm well aware, but there's no reason to offend," Sigurd joked. Rowan heard his breath rattling around his wheezy ribcage like the bellows of a clunky furnace.

Rowan looked on stupefied.

"Sigurd has contracted a viral enigma, Herr Guthrie. Skjærsild's been monitoring his condition for some time. The prognosis is... " Sverre hesitated.

"-Terminal," Sigurd interrupted.

"Sigurd, you shouldn't be out and about in your condition," Rowan said.

"Kdt. Asperheim has deemed it important to see you off to Forst Fodt and Bifrost-"

"-Please Sverre!" Sigurd shouted. With a flick of his skeletal hand, he shooed the administrator away. "Leave us. I've important matters to discuss with Herr Guthrie, no time for your self-serving bureaucracy."

"As you wish Sigurd," Sverre said, offended by Sigurd's fevered boorishness. "Ragna, come with me-"

"-No!" Sigurd roared. "She stays."

"So be it then," he huffed. Angered by the unpleasant exchange, Sverre flipped the hem of his trench coat and sped up the diomedea's gangway.

Ragna cowered behind Rowan, hands held to her face in fear. Sigurd's atrophied body had mutated into a grotesque caricature. He was frightening her and he knew it. Maybe that was the point. Rowan stood by ignorant, a third wheel and ignorant of their past relationship. Sigurd controlled her with a distant undertow, sharp and unrelenting.

"Sigurd, I'm terribly sorry to see you like this-"

"-Are you Herr Guthrie? Forgive me but at times your antiquated politeness betrays you. You've achieved much in your short stint in Midgard. You've your wings now. The chrysalis of your old life shed. I commend you on your metamorphosis. The Congress of Tyr has deemed you worthy of your own legion and what a magnificent legion it is, the mighty Suncasapa of the Lifthrasir Corp. Some of those varm-soldat served under my command, brave men who lost their lives fighting for the future. Do you know how long I've served in the Ny Æsiri military?" he asked, a cough bursting from phlegm filled lungs.

"No, Sigurd. How long?"

"More years than your service in His Majesties 242nd, I'm sure. I've known no life other than the military. It's in my blood, honor, dignity and duty to my people. If you doubt me, you can ask her." Sigurd said. He glowered at Ragna as she dodged from shoulder to shoulder. "But that's not really relevant to a man's soldiering, is it Herr Guthrie? -Ragna dear, come out from behind him. Let me have a look at you."

Rowan stood aside. She shuffled up to his chair like a child before a paddling. Sigurd craned his sweaty neck to give her a menacing once over. Bulging veins strained to supply his shivering body with blood.

Rowan remembered his regiment's bout with the Spanish Flu, burning the life out of Tommies in the medical tents. He pictured them there now, like Sigurd, eyes sucked back, pasty pale flesh, and watery lungs, coiled up like starving dogs. But Sigurd's will was strong, possessed by some otherworldly constitution. He wasn't begging for mercy or death but was in fact craving it.

"So, is Ragna taking good care of you?"

"I find her services indispensable."

"Indispensable, hear that Ragna?" Sigurd grinned. "From such small beginnings to Kdt. Guthrie's custodian...-Your father would be proud. Don't you agree, Rowan?"

"She would make any father proud."

"Fond of her affections, are you?"

"-Sigurd please," Ragna cried.

"What's this about?" Rowan asked confused.

"It's not for me to assume something about one's character, but I'll wager you probably know more than you suspect. She's taken with you. That way she looks at you. It's unmistakable. I've seen it. Not personally mind you," Sigurd grinned. "Ragna doesn't give herself lightly or rationally for that matter-"

"-Stop it Sigurd," Ragna muttered, tears streaming down her cheek.

"-Enough," Rowan interjected. "There's no need to go upsetting anyone. Your fever's gotten the best of you. There's no place for such insinuation. I won't have it. Ragna, join Sverre in the diomedea."

Ragna brushed her tears and shuffled away.

Sigurd hollered once gain for her. She stopped. "You're doing extremely important work. Don't forget that." Frightened, she fled up the gangway and disappeared into the diomedea's bulbous girth.

"What was that about?"

"-Let me ask you something." Sigurd said, ignoring the question.

"If you must."

"What makes a war hero? What is it about someone that makes them so fierce, they're able triumph over insurmountable odds and emerge unscarred?"

"Why does any man fight, Sigurd, love of homeland, love for their people and creed... They fight to protect allies from common enemies. They fight for patriotism-"

"-Enough!" Sigurd sneered. "You remind me of Sverre with that nonsense. Those are reasons given by people who know nothing of combat. You and I know that, in war, we fight like animals bred from pure survival instinct. But that doesn't make a war hero, does it? You're a decorated veteran of course. Now tell me again. What fire did you light in your belly that day in December?"

"I wanted to survive. I did what I had to do for my men."

"-A half truth," Sigurd slurred, drool overflowing from his purple lips. Death was hovering low, ready to snatch him away at any second. But like a demon, he prattled on.

"And what, pray tell, was the reason?" Rowan asked in contempt.

"There's a legend written in the annals of our ancestors. Before praying to Odin, Tyr and Thor for victory, the ancients dressed in bear hides. It was believed that by taking the beast's form, the warrior would be granted berserker rage. -Are you familiar?"

"A bear? I saw a Prussian bear in a traveling menagerie once, when I was child-"

"-Berserkers, possessed by the ursine spirit, would fight enthralled with bloodlust. Their valor had nothing to do with civilized notions of honor, patriotism or compassion. It had everything to do with that deep bitter injustice inside every man. Some let it wash over them like waves, weak and pitiful, while others harness it and use it for victory."

"Bitter Injustice?-"

"-Senseucht, call it self-righteous martyrdom, call it whatever. As for myself, I call it Odin's nectar. No berserker ever razed an enemy redoubt with a pulpy heart. They seized their angst, destroyed their foe, shaming the naysayers. It's what The Edda described as the purging."

"Purging? That's not me, Sigurd."

"You're wrong. It is you! If you look into that silent heart, you'll see the residue of the living stain, those scars made from the regrets of a former life. Those are the scars of a war hero, your scars Herr Guthrie, the berserker heart."

Rowan was silent. How Sigurd could pass such brazen judgment shocked him. His words were slow poison, seducing him with sick fascination, prying apart a long forgotten cellar door that coaxed darkness. His sense was neutered, but he felt ghostly electricity shimmer over his spine.

"Nonsense," Rowan muttered.

"You don't look convinced."

"Convinced as ever. If you'll pardon me, I must be leaving."

"Remember, you're dead Rowan! And soon, I too will die. We're alike, you and me. Haunted in life, its only fitting we'll haunt the living in death."

"You and I are nothing alike," Rowan said, his voice wavering with mechanical vibrato.

"Time will tell."

"Goodbye Sigurd, I wish you mercy. Godspeed."

Another cough burst from his lungs. The technicians moved in to stabilize him. Whatever synthetic medical cocktail they'd pumping through his infected veins was quickly losing steam. His hands gripped the tendril chair's armrests as he

strained to brace himself from the convulsions. He slipped in and out of consciousness, triggering the electronic alarms of the technicians' medical monitors. His life was ebbing at a steady clip. Rowan walked away and ambled up the gangway into the cabin, leaving the wet sounds behind.

An airman escorted him down a tubular hall to the main passenger compartment. The interior looked like eggshell but was soft to the touch, fabricated from an insulation that dampened noise to a whisper. Administrators and military men eyed him as he walked back. He felt an uncomfortable feeling of celebrity from their prowling eyes. This trip was high profile, and the authorities had lavished the voyage with excessive pomp.

Ragna was already seated when he arrived, staring vacantly into the recessed lighting. Her tears had dried, but her face was streaked with wisps of wet hair. She ignored him. He sat next to her and looked out a porthole. Sverre sat across from them, fidgeting with a portable administrative console.

"You've business on Forst Fodt? I didn't know you were escorting us," Rowan said.

"The Congress of Tyr has established several advanced development labs in the Heimdall Archipelago. I'm overseeing one of Skjærsild's new projects," he explained.

Rowan noticed from his sour expression that he was still reeling from Sigurd's quipping. Odd, considering Sigurd was on death's door and deserving of a little empathy, if not pity. Rowan turned to look out the window.

The airman fastened the passenger's buckles as the diomedea prepared for takeoff. An intercom broke the quiet, informing them that ascent was

imminent. He was excited to fly. The idea had intrigued him since the war, the chance to fly above the fray and muck below, soar above the clouds and forget about the blood and grit. Now was his chance, some thousand years later.

A mechanical groan shook the hull as the diomedea's anchors disengaged, freeing the hydrogen dirigibles. The sky-port receded, enveloped by the towering cityscape of the Ny Midgard's downtown core. The twelve towers of the subsidiaries formed the city's shimmering spine, bordered by the frayed Stillehavet coast to the west and the Bmur to the east. What remained was the urban chaos of Ytter-Midgard dotted Ny Æsiri military outposts, or 'sikrings'. Rowan saw the battles raging on, strands of fire scarring the city like No Man's Land.

Clouds rushed by, washing the cabin in gray. Rowan pulled a cigarette from a storage pouch and lit it. Sverre looked up surprised. Ragna pulled the fag from his fingers and extinguished it before he could take a drag.

"Ragna!" Rowan complained.

"Stop it, " she snapped. "It's irritating."

Sverre intervened. "Ny Æsiri don't smoke, but if they did, I'm sure it'd be against the rules to smoke in indoor public places, especially for a diomedea flight. High altitudes, large amounts of hydrogen, surely you can understand?"

"Suppose you're right. It's just that it relaxes my mind, makes me feel normal."

"Normal," Sverre repeated, smiling clumsily.

The stratocumulus parted, revealing Jotenheim's expansive glacial plain buttressed by a massif of icefalls. It looked endless, undifferentiated whiteness blotted by ice-encrusted basalt as far

as the eye could see. The east dimmed with sunset, its vastness hidden by the Earth's purplish shadow. Rowan had never seen so much ice. The Alps paled completely.

The intercom broke the silence again to announce the diomedea's conversion to forward flight. Like an albatross, the large wings folded out and down in tandem with the deflating balloons. Blue jets ignited from underneath the vehicle's trailing canards, propelling the craft gently ahead. The pilot informed them Forst Fodt landfall would be sometime the following day. The thin air of the upper atmosphere was calm, lulling a few passengers to sleep as the engines hummed.

Ragna nudged him.

"It's time for your sleep cycle." She pulled out a preloaded container from a nearby storage cabinet. "It should last most of the flight."

"So soon? Shame to miss the journey," he said, nodding at the window.

"Psychosis and then coma, we've been through this, Rowan. Anyway, there's nothing between Midgard and Heimdall except ocean for thousands of kilometers."

She'd been deep in thought and had little tolerance for him. Rowan took the container of fluid and looked into the syrupy mix. He discretely pulled a concentrate from his shielding, and when no one was looking, dropped the dose into the soveaske.

No one believed he dreamt. Skjærsild's engineers thought the monitors would pick up all anomalous activity, but the tuning logs showed nothing. Tormod believed him, even though his cohorts didn't. He'd concocted a serum with a small overdose, enough to provoke dreams from Rowan's

necrotic brain. Rowan threw back the mixture and guzzled it.

"He was delusional. I wouldn't believe anything he said," Ragna said abruptly.

"Sigurd? Definitely out of his mind with fever, no doubt. He did mention your father though. Did he know him?"

"Yes."

"Were they friends?"

"No," she sneered. "My father was gentle and pragmatic. Sigurd's nothing like him, brazen, rash and arrogant. Principles my father despised."

"They'd a professional relationship?" Rowan asked, hoping to dredge more up.

"Sigurd was the kommandant of the battalion, in charge with the security detail of my father's enclave. His negligence and contempt led to my father's death. He complained that kind of work was beneath him. 'Work for boy soldiers and mindless automatons', he used to say." She pursed her lips. She was holding something back.

Rowan said nothing.

"He always had a knack for self-important shameless promotion. In the end, Tyrian military leadership bought into it and he rose through the ranks."

Rowan nodded, half awake.

"I guess his luck's finally ran out. Skuld's skein of fate has caught up with him. It was like he was rotting right in front of us. Did you see him?" she said, repulsed. "He looked like a Niflheim troll, like his soul had turned inside out."

"Lust's ugly," Rowan slurred. He wiped a puddle of fluid from his mouth, his mind drunk with synthetic sleep. "I know that look."

She gave him a cold stare.

"Was he a suitor?" Rowan asked, careworn.

"You've no business asking that question."

He repeated the question like a broken phonograph, eyes blurring as he struggled to sit upright. She said nothing. He mumbled the questions again.

He looked outside and felt his head flop against the tinted glass with a hollow thud. He strained to look through twittering eyelashes but saw nothing except the dusk glow of Jotenheim's receding glaciers. His constitution was spent. His mind shut down.

#

A layer of windblown snow dusted his boots as he searched the horizon for whatever it was he was looking for. Basalt monoliths ringed by blue crevasses drifted by as he continued to march. There was a loaded silence, broken by the sound of his shuffling feet and the panting of his lungs. Fingertips raw and inflamed with frostbite, he clutched his fists, trying to shield them from the cold, but the thin wool provided no relief.

Something on the horizon caught his eye, a collapsed fence or an alpine border marker. Flapping material hung from the top like a wind-shredded flag. He stumbled towards it. Gaping crevasses obstructed his path. Wearily treading across ice bridges, he looked into the chasms below. Shards of sheared glacier lay jumbled in heaps. There was something else, ruined buildings and metal scaffold, the remains of a lost city buried under the heaving weight of the glacial sheet.

He staggered on and noticed it wasn't a fence post at all but the wreckage of a sailboat, its

mast poking above the frozen crust. The canvas was all that remained of its bleached mainsail, still hoisted and fastened with rusted halyards to a splintered crossbeam.

"How long has this been here?"

He scoured the snowdrifts. Sunlight burst through the clouds, sending a throbbing pain to the back of his eyes. Squinting, he saw a black patch underneath the snow. Clearing it revealed a layer of polished frost. He shaded his eyes and peered below to see an intact day sloop preserved in ice. Clothing and debris lay scattered around the hull, a picnic basket, stowed rigging and foul weather gear. He looked closer. It was a person.

"My God!"

It was Anna, her withered body lying against the keel. He rummaged through his field pack and pulled out a bayonet to chip the ice. After minutes of whittling, he looked below, clinging to the ice like a Christmas window-shopper. Frozen bubbles clouded the light, but he could make out her murky face. She looked like an angel, pale skin with softly closed eyes and at peace.

"Anna, what happened to you?"

Something snapped. He looked around, trying to gain his bearings. Disorientation swamped his amnesiac mind. Sense of time and place collided, chaos and madness. Clawing at his scalp, he held his head trying to slow the dizziness. He pounded the ice.

"Anna, I can't help you!"

He slid belly down on the ice. He felt his heart race with thoughts of death.

"You weren't strong enough. I never gave up on you Anna. I'd have given you everything if you'd

asked. If only you would've held out hope. But now..."

He sat up, shaded his brow and looked off at the horizon. The sting of tears sliced through his wind-burnt cheeks.

"The irony's almost too much." He looked at her warped girlish face. "A thousand years gone and I've reversed the fate you abandoned me to. I'm still here. It could've been different."

The distant storm clouds faded from the horizon, leaving behind suspended ice crystals that shimmered like a particulate rainbow.

"We could've had a life, children, a cottage in the countryside, growing old together... But instead, you chose someone else. Not so bad, seeing the end of all things. To know the future, Anna, it's something to see..."

She wore a summer dress, the lace intact around her hem. He noticed she was clutching her white lace gloves.

"...And such a burden. Truth cares not its casualties, but to see it, to see humanity like this, I don't know..." he sighed. "This is something altogether different. You'd never understand even if I could explain it."

The light shifted under the ice revealing more of the sloop. Something was written on the bow.

"Bristol."

Diluted thoughts muddled his mind as he struggled to piece it together. He felt his breathing fade and his heartbeat disappear, then no sound but the howling wind. His past emerged from the time ether again.

"I remember!" He laughed. "It's not so bad. You'll grow to appreciate it like I have. The ice

has kept you safe, but now they can make you whole again!"

He chipped at the ice again, rapidly dulling the bayonet. He wanted to save her, reanimate her and make her dysterfolk. A life with her was impossible now, he knew that, but she could reawaken to the world of the undead. She could be with him. He would save her, and they would be together forever.

Gray ooze clumped the snow as he continued to dig. Some of his outer fingers were missing, sliced off in his haste to chip the ice. There was no blood, just the black syrup. He stopped as he started to whimper. Like a prison cell, the broken snowy expanse closed in around him.

"Ghosts haunt the lives which they crave most dear. We've become one another's prison, you and I, worse than nothing at all."

[TD] CHAPTER NINE

Rowan hovered above the pearl beds, watching shafts of sunlight bounce over the reef. Bare-breasted native girls dove to collect the oysters from the underwater pens, curiously swimming circles around him as they harvested black pearl much as their ancestor's had done for thousands of years. They looked like angels, haloed by the light of Forst Fodt's turquoise waters.

Spotted rays glided overhead, casting shadows over the corals like drifting clouds. The lagoon was thriving with sea life. Rowan found it hard to believe the Earth was dying. Everything was in harmony, from the swarm of reef sharks to the anemone-cloaked clown fish. Abundance had pacified the survival instinct within the lagoon, creating a temple to the world's last remaining creatures.

The cellemaskin had tuned his ears to sift the acoustics of the liquid world. He shifted through the registers, isolating the sharp clicks of scuttling lobsters from the laughter of the pearl girls above. Closing his eyes, he concentrated. Noise mixed and distorted, stretched and shortened into an aural spectrum. He subdued the auditory clutter and filtered pure notes of resonance like color through a prism.

He noticed a sound rise above the din, a whale song, like a drowning viola from outside the reef. Rowan fell under the spell of the haunting drone. The whale was probably the last of its kind and alone in a dying world. Ice would cover the oceans and entomb the animal in its briny crust, forever.

He opened his eyes to see a diver girl glide past on her way to the skiffs, her satchel overflowing with oysters. She looked younger than Ragna. The beauty of the Æsiri people hid their age like no other race. The natives of the islands were the True Æsiri, Heimdall's original creation, and their skin was darker than their Ny Æsiri cousins.

He followed them to the surface where girl-laughter greeted him. None minded his ghoulish looks, a few stared in wonder, some ignored him while others treated him like a pet. The girls finished up and paddled back to the white sands of the inner island. Rowan hitched a ride on the canoe's outrigger, drifting behind like dragnet. The going was slow, the hull heavy with oysters ready to be shucked and shipped to Ny Midgard's shopping districts.

Boat wake washed over him, rinsing the residual rot from his skin. Ny Midgard's lifeless streets had been replaced by the lush abundance of Forst Fodt. Gray replaced by color, the people carefree and full of life, it was a reprieve from the scorched gloom that'd infected Midgard like a death knell.

Walking onto the shore, he greeted Ragna. More modest than the island girls, she wore a floral skirt tucked around her bosom and an orchid propped behind her ear. She was looking at the distant shores of the barrier islands, the 'motus', the silhouettes of the copra palms swaying against the setting sun's magenta. The diver girls finished pulling their catch from the boat and waved goodbye.

Ragna was preoccupied. Something was on her mind.

He coughed, spewing seawater from his lungs.
"Are you all right?"

She looked up but said nothing, wiggling her toes in and out of the wet sand.

"This place, it's like something from a Melville novel. It's Amazing."

An awkward moment passed. "Yes... amazing," she said at last. "Those pearl divers are taken with you. They've never seen dysterfolk. They're not afraid of you in the slightest."

"-Were you afraid?" he asked, sitting down next to her.

Ragna paused. "The first couple of days."

"You'd a way of avoiding me, talking at me but not to me. My basic human empathy hadn't escaped me enough not to sense your discomfort."

"It got the best of me. I know you couldn't help it. I've been around the kuld-soldat before, but they're different than you. They know what they are. Death for them is not such an event."

"-Don't know if anyone's so different when it comes to the 'Big Black'."

"Maybe -You were a stranger in Midgard and a thousand years from home." Ragna continued. "It was that way you looked at me... lost. It wasn't pity, which never did anyone any good. I don't know... you just looked so desperate."

"Like a stray dog," Rowan laughed.

"That's not what I meant."

"-Mongrels are more lovable," he joked.

"-What about your war, Rowan? You don't talk about it."

Rowan shrugged.

"Your disappointment must be distressing. Here we are, still fighting one another even as everything slips under ice."

"Disappointed maybe, but hopeful. Things happen for a reason. I'm here, talking to you for a reason. The Lord's not done with me yet," he smiled.

"-For better or worse."

"For the better, hopefully." He winked. "To see the end of war with these faded eyes... That'd be a gift."

"You honor Skuld, spinning the skeins of fate beneath Yggrasil as she binds heaven and the underworld at the Axis Mundi."

"The Edda?"

Ragna nodded.

"What exactly is Yggrasil?"

"The great ash tree, the divine center of the pantheon and Midgard. The Edda speaks of it in length. It stays green forever, even in autumn. The dropped leaves keep their color, never fading."

"Never fading, eh?"

"Like you, the leaf fallen from Yggrasil, the Suncasapa sent by Ymir. You're here to see the Æsiri through Ragnarok. It's the prophecy."

Prophecies, Rowan believed were self-fulfilling, impotent, and unable to infuse him with holy verve. Although coincidence had a funny way of skewing the notion, blurring lines between the believable and the unbelievable. He was attracted to how Ragna innocently relied on it. He found her faith irresistible, a beauty in the absolute, the tangible and the unshakeable.

"Don't look a gift horse in the mouth," Rowan whispered.

"I don't understand."

"Something my Uncle Hamish used to tell me, don't lessen a gift by asking too many questions."

His quip for when he'd stumble across a boon of purloined diamonds in the seedier districts of Antwerp. Regardless, thank you"

"You're welcome," she paused. "Interesting proverb, not sure what it means. Horses?"

"Aye," Rowan smirked.

"I've never seen a horse. What were they like?"

"They were big animals, large and gentle. I used to be in a cavalry regiment before they commandeered the beasts for caisson deployment. Relegated to parades and such after that, they weren't much use in the muck of No Man's Land."

"Most of the land beasts are extinct now, musk ox, moose, bear -You were lucky to have seen them. The Æsiri never kept horses."

"There wouldn't be much room for them here," Rowan said, looking around the narrow tropical beach. "Shame, loyal animals, good in battle and always brave, the perfect soldier."

The sun sunk below the horizon. The beach was empty, the girls long gone. A few lights twinkled along the shoreline, the natives going about their evening chores and settling in for the night.

"We need to go. There's someone Sverre wants you to meet, an important research scientist working for Skjærsild."

She stood to her feet and walked away. Rowan followed her into the darkening jungle.

#

The hydrokraft was cold. Beads of water condensed around the glass as he cradled it in his palm. Vine gardenias clung to the island-side of the antechamber, broken by basalt ledges trickling water from hidden fountains. Rowan had never been in such a place, completely in harmony with the tropical flora of Forst Fodt. He took a few sips,

sat the container down and leaned back to take it all in.

Ragna sat nearby, letting the running water drip over her fingertips. An open terrace separated the room from the night. The air was humid and dense, carrying the soft hiss of the distant Stillehavet. Rowan squinted, skewing his sight to mimic the impressionist dabs of Monet or Van Gogh. A full moon bathed the valley below in blue-silver like watercolor. His eyes mechanically dilated to absorb and enhance the moonlight. Every thing was alive, the smallest motion enhanced, from the gentle sway of a copra frond to the flutter of dragonfly wings.

He pushed aside the hydrokraft, picked up a pair of hefty pearls from a nearby bowl and jostled them in his hand. Unable to feel their texture, he clicked them together, sensing density and weight from the sound. They were beautiful, mysterious and dark.

"I always wanted to give Anna pearls, but I could never have imagined anything like these," Rowan said, letting the spheres roll across the table. "-I was barely able to save enough quid for a ring."

"That ring around your neck?" Ragna asked, pulling her hand from the water.

"It was our engagement ring. My Uncle Hamish made it for me, a brilliant artisan that bloke. He was a bit rough around the edges and had a taste for the Glenfiddich, but a brilliant jeweler." Rowan pulled the chain from his neck and let the diamond sparkle in the dim light.

"Why do you still keep it?"

"She'd sent it back to me during the war."

"The ring you gave to her to promise marriage-?"

"-Aye," Rowan said abruptly. "I suppose one could say it that way."

"I couldn't imagine anything more lonely or horrible," Ragna said, walking over to a potted hibiscus.

"She didn't mean for it to be so painful."

"How could she not?"

"People are temporal creatures. It's hard to hold grudges for words said in the past, words someone believed to be true at the time. It doesn't matter now, she's been dead for over a thousand years."

"Maybe she sent it by mistake?"

Rowan shook his head.

"-A memento, so you wouldn't forget about her."

"There was a letter that explained everything. She made her intentions clear."

She shook her head in disbelief. "How'd you manage it after that, with the war?"

"I didn't think about it much. I just did what I thought best," Rowan paused, the answer should've been obvious but he'd never been able to put words to it. He'd never been able to answer that question for himself. He just couldn't explain. "I survived the battle but not the war, remember?"

"Right-"

The door opened. A servant informed them their host was waiting. They followed the man through an enclosed garden walkway and into a banquet chamber, filled with a large crescent table. He showed them their tendril chairs and filled Ragna's glass with 'noni' juice. Inaudible voices crept in from the outside.

"Ah, Herr Guthrie! Welcome to my modest domicile. You must excuse my lack of hospitality. It's rare we find ourselves entertaining

dysterfolk, much less one of such eminence. We'll have more hydrokraft brought in." He was a graying gentleman, accompanied by a relaxed and smiling Sverre. The slow pace of the island life had loosened him.

"Rowan, let me have the pleasure of introducing you to a genuine Ny Æsiri treasure, Dr. Amundsen, our lead technical fellow for the Tyr research labs here in the Archipelago," Sverre said.

The elderly man held out a leathery palm and shook Rowan's hand with a firm grip. He'd a sincerity that disarmed.

"Dr. Torstein Amundsen?" Rowan asked eagerly, remembering the name Tormod had deciphered from the data crystal.

"No, but I'd a great uncle who went by Torstein. He passed from Midgard over a hundred years ago, a true clansman if there ever was one. Have you heard of him?"

Rowan grabbed at his chest, nudging the data crystal. He was about to pull it out, when he thought better of it.

"Not sure," Rowan said, sheepishly. "The name's familiar. I've spent a considerable amount of time studying Surtur's technical archives. I may've come across it."

"You can call me Vidar. Always good to see a healthy appetite for knowledge!" he exclaimed. "I was a young man when Uncle Tor' passed from Midgard, but I do know he made quite a name researching climatology before the consolidation, always the prolific scientist. I wasn't aware any of his work had endured the dissolution of the councils." Vidar clapped his hands, prompting the servants to lavish the table with platters of

assorted fruits and pickled cephalopods. Someone brought Rowan a cigarette and quickly lit it.

"Thank you," he replied, taking a few puffs.

"Least we could do. Not fair really, all of us indulging," Vidar said.

Rowan smoked his cigarette and watched the small feast commence. Far from the partisan conflicts of the Æsiri mainland, Rowan observed Forst Fodt's capacity to excite something human in the Æsiri. The dread of Midgard's siege mentality was lifted. Even Ragna smiled, listening to Dr. Amundsen's anecdotes as he entertained them with stories of island life.

"So you said your great uncle was a clansman?" Rowan interjected, changing the conversation. There was something linking Vidar Amundsen to the stolen data crystal, and Rowan's curiosity was simmering.

"Torstein believed in clan rule until the bitter end. Always the idealist, he was convinced it was the only form of fair and transparent governance."

"I've heard of the clans."

"They ruled prior to consolidation, a tribal throwback. They constituted a representative republic that gave the prominent families authority over subsidiary decisions. Their constituents were elected Æsiri representatives who held Midgard's politics in check," Vidar explained.

"What did you mean by the bitter end?"

"Fimbulwinter changed the political discourse. Coupled with the growing Vanir threat, the Congress of Tyr was formed after several emergencies. The premiers of Midgard's subsidiaries appointed the Tyrians. They then chose a chief mogul. When they took power, they

disbanded the councils, ergo the bitter end, especially if you were a clansman like Uncle Tor'. They decided there was too much risk in leaving the crucial decisions to bickering clansmen. The Edda prophecies are such that -are you aware of The Edda?"

"Yes," he nodded.

"The Edda foretells the events of Ragnarok. They had to be taken seriously. We ignore them at our peril. The Ny Æsiri holy men have the ear of the Tyrians, and with that knowledge, they guide our nation's future."

"What happened to him?"

"Uncle Tor' was marginalized in Ny Midgard politick. His view on the Tyrians -how should I say this without denigrating the man -were out-of-step with rational pragmatic policy, as they said. He wanted to retain a status quo that grew impossible with Fimbulwinter and the Vanir invasions."

"But you said he was a scientist, a climatologist-"

"-A damn brilliant one. His work mapping upper-stratospheric turbulence allows us to guide diomedea virtually anywhere on Earth."

"What about his ideology was controversial?" Rowan asked.

"His philosophy regarding egalitarianism fell out of favor with Surtur labor policy. To build legions of varm-soldat and their logistics, to create Skjærsild and its research labs, took massive amounts of energy. The Æsiri people needed to sacrifice-"

"-The Mindre Æsiri, you mean-" Rowan interrupted.

"-All Æsiri Rowan," Sverre corrected as he pulled a bobtail squid from his lips. Rowan ignored him.

"Uncle Tor's heart was in the right place. Towards the end of his public life, his dissident views were vilified. Some even called him a coward, unwarranted of course. He was a fiercely independent man, always with a passion for rule of law."

Rowan picked up on Vidar's nostalgia. He took a last sip of hydrokraft and extinguished the cigarette into an empty glass. After a pause, the conversation drifted back to lighter topics. Vidar was eager to listen, and Rowan obliged him with his trivial stories of post-Victorian life in industrial Britain. There was pragmatism to Vidar that his agenda-driven compatriots lacked. Maybe it was because Vidar was a scientist who had a curiosity for history, unlike the myopic Ny Midgard bureaucrats.

Sverre and Sigurd made Rowan feel like an artifact, an object in the room one could talk about but not with. Never alive but not dead, Skikk was a malaise of dampened life, full of erratic emotion and numb ugliness. But somehow, sitting and talking with the Vidar bridged chasms of time the death programming could not. Rowan felt at ease.

Except a few remarks about his family history, Vidar didn't mention his Uncle Torstein again. Dissidents were marginalized in Ny Midgard, and Rowan noticed Sverre grimace at the mention of Torstein, especially his opposition to Æsiri militancy. It wasn't a surprise. Rowan knew Sverre's flavor of nationalism and ideology. He was a company man, a reactionary. Wartime London's

cigar and brandy clubs were full of old codgers just like him.

But the mystery of the data crystal remained, intensified by its Vanir connection. How could a man, dead for more than a century, send a message? And what would he possibly say? Was he undead too, leading the Vanir guerilla army or seeking revenge against old political adversaries? Farfetched and unlikely, now wasn't the time. Rowan held the crystal's mesh cage tight.

"As you've been informed Rowan, Dr. Amundsen is going to continue your conditioning to improve your Asgardian war-fighting capabilities. He would like to document his observations for future research," Sverre explained.

"Future research?" Rowan asked.

"Dr. Amundsen has been commissioned by Skjærsild for a research project I will be directing. Very exciting advancements in Skikk."

Vidar walked the length of the table and sat down next to Rowan. The lights of the hall dimmed as servants removed half-empty platters from the table. Torchlight filtered in from outside, giving Vidar grandfatherly warmth. His face lacked the moonfaced shape of the Æsiri, and his eyes weren't the typical brown but pale blue, some recessive gene from a Caucasian ancestor.

"We've certain urges, infused millennia ago by nature to guide the evolutionary processes. Some call it 'instinct' or the recessive genetic memory that drives the reptile-brain. It instills compulsive feelings that lack rational explanation. -Do you know what I'm talking about?" Vidar asked, his voice like velvet.

"-Fear, love, violence, anger, sexuality..."

"-Right. Skjærsild engineers and myself have studied these compulsions for years, recreating their affects digitally in the cellemaskin architecture-"

"Digitally?" Rowan hadn't a clue.

He nodded. "We've synthesized certain body chemistries by storing hormonal information electrically."

Rowan fidgeted.

"Your corpse was like a baby, fresh from the womb. We tricked your mature mind and allowed it to adapt to the shell of its re-animated cadaver. You're not alive, but the cellemaskin does the best it can to treat your brain as though it were. As long as your cerebrum senses its corporeal self, the rest follows, like threading a needle," Vidar explained.

Rowan lit another cigarette.

"Skjærsild's crude hormones give you the rudimentary foundation that lends itself for further development. We've managed basic functionality but have reworked the programming to accommodate more capability, instincts that are well suited for Asgard."

"These are the predatory urges I've felt. I'd an episode where I found myself alone with the enemy in Ytter-Midgard. It was a muscular response..." Rowan hesitated, "It guided my natural rhythms to kill."

Vidar remained silent and apprehensive, his eye wandering to meet Sverre's.

"For reasons we've not wholly been able to explain, your aptitude for emotional synthesis is off the charts. Dysterfolk recruits are predisposed to Skikk. They know what's expected when they die, and after rebirth, there's nothing

to muddy the waters. But you were something completely unexpected."

"More unexpected for me than you," Rowan said, taking another drag.

"Indeed. It created an emergent quality our engineers haven't been able to model. We've changed your programming regiment, but your uniqueness has piqued our interest. That's why you're here. That's why certain 'predatory urges' feel awkward and unnatural-"

"-Alien," Rowan added.

"I can only assume. This shock, we believe, is responsible for your emotional episodes, crying, longing, unrequited infatuation, a lingering but unrealizable desire and identity schisms," Vidar said.

"-It sounds so mechanical."

"In a way, it's very mechanical, but living organisms are complicated assemblages of organic clockwork. Dysterfolk mirror the living, using different sets of rules bent to achieve similar ends."

"Not sure what you mean by 'similar ends', Dr. Amundsen," Rowan said.

"Unrelenting survival."

"Survival," Rowan repeated, whispering.

"It's the prime mover of biology. The living survives to procreate, but dysterfolk survive to perpetuate all Æsiri. Not an easy feat, especially for someone like you Herr Guthrie, someone who hasn't been properly..." Vidar struggled to find words.

"Indoctrinated?-"

"-Introduced," Sverre interjected. Vidar waved Sverre to be silent.

"Indoctrinated, maybe. Our cause is just, our challenge immense, and cerebral abstractions do not reconstitute battlefield readiness wholly. Our methods may confuse you now, but we feel it's more productive to work with the inherent momentum of your reanimated psyche than a reconstituted sentience with no guarantee of success."

Rowan stood up and walked to an open window. The noise of the room faded, replaced by the clicks and chirps of the night insects outside. "The inherent momentum of a reanimated psych," Rowan repeated. "Bloody hell." He shook his head, confused. He felt a hazy momentum at work, a momentum perpetuated by a thirst for redemption.

"Is everything all right, Herr Guthrie?" Vidar asked.

"Just disoriented," Rowan said, turning to face Vidar with black eyes. "Hard not to go about feeling a bit manipulated."

"It's not our intention to-"

"-I know," Rowan exclaimed. "My decisions are my own, even in this altered twilight. I'm grateful, really. I just get the impression I'm stumbling through the dusty attic of a former life, a war victim whose whole body's been amputated."

"Immortality grants eternity, and forever is an awful long time to pick up the pieces. Give it some time," Vidar said.

"I may never have had all the pieces to start."

Everyone was silent. The torches dimmed as the hour wore on. It was time to go, and Rowan was ready to leave. His mind was overheating, saliva congealing in his mouth. He needed time.

#

He traced the nano with his spear through an oasis of electric blue, careful not to frighten

the fish into the midnight blackness. Like a cat stalking a mouse, he followed the surgeonfish along the hosloft's perimeter. With a quick release, he skewered the creature before it had time to flinch. Pulling its wiggling body from the water, he flipped it into a salt basket for the pearl diver's morning breakfast. Ragna lacked an appetite for tropical fish, preferring the coldwater fair of Midgard cuisine. Better to leave it for someone than let it go to waste, he thought.

Relaxed now, he walked back into the grass-roofed hut. It was like a page torn from a Carroll novel, a village hovering over the inner lagoon, each hosloft suspended above a lily pad of submerged coral illumination. Most of the shoreline was dark, the villagers sound asleep. Rowan kept on the water-lights, an English hearth's aquatic surrogate.

He'd convinced Ragna to put off the sleep cycle a few hours. He wasn't ready for the soveaske yet, so to castigate him for his procrastination, she decided to begin the daily filtering routine first. No questions this time, just the standard regiment. He leaned back ready to start, when something caught his eye, a diomedea lifting off in the night.

"Who's leaving?"

"Herr Berjon," Ragna said. "He said he'd urgent business on Bifrost before returning to Midgard."

"I was unaware. I wasn't paying him much attention."

"No one was."

The diomedea drifted silently past one of Forst Fodt's eroded peaks and out towards the 'motus'. He followed the vehicle's dirigibles into the

upper stratosphere until they deflated, disappearing into the starry sky. He scanned the heavens for Asgard but the hour was late. It had already set. He turned back to Ragna.

"Do you like it here?"

She smiled but said nothing.

"Ragna?"

"-It's very beautiful but artificial."

She hooked up the siphon and activated the monitor. Her eyes drifted aimless over Hosloft's interior, a color-filled room garnished with vases of freshly cut red and pink heliconias. She was unimpressed. The finer things failed to entice Ragna the same way they did most Ny Æsir women.

"How is it artificial?"

"You can never get far enough away from Fimbulwinter. The violence that took my father is always with me, even in this paradise. I'm scared all the time. This island feels unnatural. There's an urge to get back to Midgard so I can keep an eye on the troubles. It doesn't make any sense but--"

"-I understand," he paused. "I remember Paris on leave, the city in spring and the outdoor cafés, the beautiful French girls, the Champs-Élysées and afternoon naps in the Le Bois. I could never relax though. It's what the Tommies called 'war nostalgia', an anxiety like the inevitable laying in wait. In a depraved way, I just wanted to get back to the Front, get it over with and be done with it."

She ran a hand along his cheek and through his bristly hair. He strained to feel her touch. He slipped off the eyeshades. Wavering net-patterns of fluid light washed over her from the glass floor below. Like damaged china, her beauty

betrayed dark fissures just beneath. She began to cry.

"Sigurd did this to you, didn't he?" Rowan said.

She wiped away a tear.

"You blame him for your father's death."

"He was a suitor of mine-"

"-I'd a feeling. It was the way he stared at you when you weren't looking, lustfully."

"My father would invite suitors with my mother's consent, and he'd arranged to have me court Sigurd. He was charming but became overeager. When I refused him, he grew depressed. He was in love with the 'idea' of me but not the person."

She got up to toggle the svartblod filter then sat next to him. The numbness of his sense ebbed with the phantasmal wave of her life force. She was close, her energy bleeding through in a way that eased the undead burden.

"There was a boy after Sigurd, an overbetjent from his contingent. My father took a liking to him and thought we'd enjoy each other's company. I fell in love with Ivar."

"Your father liked him enough not to turn him to stone, eh?" Rowan joked.

Ragna smiled. "Ivar, unlike the dwarf Alvis, was more clever. - Your remembered the story?" Rowan nodded as Ragna continued. "He'd plans to enroll in an engineering apprenticeship with the Ægir subsidiary, designing jet-flow systems for retrofitted carryalls. My father thought he'd be able to financially support me."

"What did you love about him?"

"He was different. Ny Æsiri men see everything in black and white but not Ivar. He was a very sensitive boy and courageous. He wanted nothing but peace. Midgard's violence wore on him."

"Violence does that."

"Some days he'd just weep. I was the only person who ever saw him cry, usually after something horrible had happened on patrol in Ytter-Midgard."

"Thought he was stationed with your father, at his enclave?"

Ragna pursed her lips. "Sigurd re-deployed his men to Ytter-Midgard when enclave duty grew tedious. Guarding Surtur wasn't the war-glory Sigurd had in mind. Most were like Ivar, afraid. No one wanted to die for Sigurd's vanity." She grew quiet.

"What happened to Ivar?"

"Sigurd grew jealous, obsessed and in retribution, he reassigned Ivar to checkpoint duty in Ytter-Midgard. He couldn't refuse. Sigurd was his kommandant. It was dangerous and Ivar hated it, treating the Mindre like animals the way Sigurd forced them to. Then there was the attack on his checkpoint." Ragna paused, her mouth tense, eyes pinched in slow agony. "A Vanir guerilla rigged a Mindre child to detonate close to the varm-soldat. The blast spared Ivar. But in his haste to secure the sikring, enemy snipers tore him apart, killing and almost everyone else, until Sigurd and his varm-soldat arrived to secure the area."

Tears streamed down her cheeks as she spoke. Her hands trembled and her voice shook. Ragna was distant most days, a girl of iron, but now, she was like an egg that'd suddenly cracked, its soft insides spilling out everywhere.

"Ragna?-"

"-With a reduced force," she continued, "Sigurd pulled his lahg away from my father's enclave."

Within days, the Vanir took advantage and the saboteur attacked, killing him and everyone else."

"Bloody hell."

"After a year without my father, my mother and I were near destitute. I knew Sigurd still had affections for me. So I pleaded to him, and he arranged for me to work at Skjærsild as your custodian."

"-My custodian," Rowan muttered.

"I prayed to Freya, hoping Ivar knew how much I loved him when he died. I hoped it was quick. The idea of him alone and slowly dying would've broken my heart."

She sobbed quietly. Not knowing what to do, Rowan gently touched her shoulder. She leaned into him, wincing briefly as she touched his cold flesh. Her heat warmed his skin like bare flesh on leather. He cradled her as she cried.

With his head resting against hers, he fought for sense. He worked his lungs to inhale her fragrance, breathing deep but smelling nothing. Touching his anesthetized lips to her hair, he labored to recapture lost virility. There was nothing his cadaver could offer, not even mock potency. He wanted desperately to be intimate and feel her stir against him, but it was hopeless. Mind and body were disconnected.

She looked at him, lips hovering close to his. Her eyes were soft and moist as she moved in to kiss him. Full of an abstract fear, he tenderly pushed her away. The needs of the living were forbidden to the undead.

"It wasn't my intention to take advantage of the moment. I'm sorry," Rowan said, getting up from the sofa.

"It's been so long since anyone listened. "

"-We've been through much. Ivar was blessed to have you."

She nodded slowly.

"It's late, Ragna. You're tired," he said, reaching for his canister of cigarettes. "I'm going to step out for a fag, but I'll be back in time to start the sleep cycle."

The evening air was still, save the distant broil of the coral breaks. He walked out onto the plank decking and saw a girl collecting the surgeonfish he'd caught earlier. She was a pearl diver. He recognized her bronzed skin and sun-bleached hair, just a few years younger than Ragna. He sparked his torch and caught her attention.

"Hello," he said.

Lacking the shame of the island peoples, she was partially clothed. Even in the dim glow of the undersea light, her beauty was blinding. She approached him. He stepped back.

"Are you from the institute?" she asked.

"Doctor Amundsen, yes. I'm part of his work for Skjærsild."

"What's your name?"

"Rowan."

"I'm Hannah. You're eyes are pitch black like a porpoise and your teeth are metal," she paused. "Do they hurt?"

"No," Rowan laughed. "I don't much hurt. I'm incapable of 'hurting'. I'm dysterfolk."

"Dysterfolk," Hannah repeated. "I know of the dysterfolk, but I didn't know they were such talented spear-fishers. Forst Fodt men don't hunt nano. They're too quick and swim too deep. Those eyes..." She reached up and touched his face, "-must be sent by the gods." Her hands walked over his

bare chest, facets and all, like an auctioneer sizing up a thoroughbred.

"Glad you've a use for it," Rowan said awkwardly. "Shame to see food go to waste."

"A delicacy, thank you."

She put the fish in a small net and slung it over her bare shoulders. Her large eyes glimmered with fascination. Maybe it was an island naiveté, regardless, he found her beguiling. With a quick goodbye, she dove into the clear water and swam off into the settling darkness.

"Goodbye," he whispered, finishing his cigarette.

Ragna was curled asleep on the bed when he returned. She'd prepared the soveaske for him on a nearby table. He took a sip and watched her sleep, noticing the rhythm of her chest as it rose and fell.

Time passed without metric. Dawn's rays spread over the still lagoon, welcomed by the squawks of distant seabirds. He noticed fishermen, rowing out to the motus to spread their nets. It was morning and she was going to be angry with him for skipping the sleep cycle. He'd failed to drink the full dose. The night had passed and he could only wonder how long he'd been watching her.

[TD] CHAPTER TEN

The training was standard technique, typical of the basic field stakes he knew from the regimental academy. The exercises were less tactical, but Vidar was keen on having Rowan unlearn his basic combat experience so he could relearn it as dysterfolk. It was no easy feat, considering the bulky shielding and the complexities of learning to use the cryptic lung-gun.

Target pillars rose from the ground at staggered intervals. Rowan reoriented the lung-gun down range and tore into granite obelisks. It was a simple exercise, destroy the columns before they reached their apex, let one pillar through and the set restarted. The sun was starting to set. It was almost time to go, so he activated the range one last time. He felt the gun more now than he had in the past, every shot fired a communion.

Aiming was less a task for the eyes and more a task for the body as cellemaskin merged the surroundings into seas of melded information. The weapon and his cadaver were one, joined via a transfer chain that bridged biological circuitry with the lung-gun's control gel. It was like a living organism, an organic transfusion, metabolizing the siphoned hydrokraft into ignitable shells. The technology Rowan would never grasp. The ammunition was magic, a stream of inexhaustible bullets tapped from the ether.

Wet pulses barked from the flanging muzzle. Rowan controlled the fire's focus, saving a narrow sputter for the target's top then eating away the bulk with dilated sprays of gooey heat. With the

last pulverized stone, he slung the weapon. The firing range fell quiet.

He was exhausted as he sat down and smoked a cigarette. The nearby copra palms stirred with the calls of blue lorry. Vidar was supposed to send an attendant to gather him for an evening engagement, but they hadn't showed yet. Rowan didn't mind. The solitude was a welcome reprieve from the week's bustle. Every second felt scheduled.

Vents hissed with white smoke as he disengaged the siphon from the gun's chamber. The mist beaded into liquid around his forearm, attracting a few hefty mosquitoes. Although he felt nothing, the jungle heat was oppressive.

"Good luck midgies, better chance carrying me away than squeezing a drop from that flesh."

The sound of microscopic proboscis, scraping his leathery flesh, crackled through muggy air. A few undeterred mosquitoes remained, continuing their fruitless efforts like machines built for a single purpose. With a flick of his black fingernail, the bugs disintegrated.

Low growls echoed through the canyon. An animal maybe, he couldn't be sure. Spooked lorry erupted from the jungle canopy, fleeing to the safety of the evening sky. Rowan focused his ears to gauge the beast's direction but the foliage and dense undergrowth disoriented. He grabbed the lung-gun and headed for the cover of the copra grove. Finding a bush-fern, he crouched and scanned the grainy dusk-light.

Minutes passed until an oversized cat emerged and circled the ruins of a destroyed target column. It was a beast from some forgotten epoch, full of oversized teeth and a chorus of muscles that rippled beneath bristling hide. It was the

size of a pony but it moved with uncanny grace, flowing like quicksilver over the broken terrain.

"Bloody hell?" Rowan whispered, stupefied.

The path back to Vidar's institute was cut off. There was no way to double back, and Rowan wasn't familiar enough with the valley to snake his way through the dense undergrowth. He was left with a dearth of options. The cat outmatched his nimbleness and its strength was beyond question. If he couldn't get off a shot, he would have to head for the lagoon's open beaches and flee into the sea.

Its wet nose sniffed the cool tropic air, looking for what Rowan could only presume was the telltale scent of dysterfolk. Seconds passed, but it didn't take long for the creature to sniff him out. With a snarl, saliva oozed from its mouth as fiery yellow eyes bore down on him. Fumbling with his chest spigot, he re-attached the lung-gun and made his escape through the palms. The cat roared and sprinted after him.

At the edge of the coconut plantation the canyon narrowed into a flume. Wading through the headwaters, he looked frantically for a ledge or a long vine he could use to climb to the sandy flats below, nothing. He dropped to one knee, lifted the barrel and honed in on the charging cat.

Pulling the trigger met with a misfired lob of ooze. His body folded like a slack puppet. The lung gun's aborted fizzie sucked the last ounce of energy from him like a drained diesel. Struggling to crawl, he tumbled through a series of connected pools and into the rushing foam of the waterfall's precipice.

The cat skirted the waterline in chase. Rowan grabbed a vine as it drifting by and sluggishly

pulled himself out of the water onto the opposite bank. Squirming through mud, he looked back but the cat was gone.

"What the bloody hell?"

He jerked the weapon loose and tossed it into the water. Something inside was broken, its innards corrupted.

"Useless."

Minutes passed but the cat was nowhere. Falling back into the muck, he looked up. Palm fronds and ropey branches swayed to reveal a violet sky peppered with stars. One caught his attention. He recognized the flicker. The planet shimmered through the shadows of the branches above. It was burning red and large.

"Asgard."

He could do nothing but lie there, ooze settling into the crevices of his shielding. He needed to get up and get moving but felt anemic. The weakness was like a flu that'd spread from the lung-gun into him.

His eyelids grew heavy with hypnotic dreamscape. The jungle shadows crept in, smearing his periphery with inky night. From the corner of his eye, a shadow rose above the gloom.

As he struggled to regain focus, the cat reappeared and attacked. Like a sword from heaven, its gargantuan teeth tore through the armor's outer layer, pinning him to the ground. Rowan launched futile punches into the beast's solid head. Wet breath shot over him as he struggled to pull the cat away. With a flick of its neck, the feline flung him into the cascades. He hit the water with a splash and tumbled, rolling over shallow rocks and into the rushing cascade.

Disoriented, he held onto a slimy boulder. But the cat was too swift and slipped its dagger-teeth under his arm, tossing him into the air. Water danced around him as he careened into a soggy ledge below, bouncing him into free space. He felt the blast of sand when he crashed full force into the shore of a shallow pond.

Swarms of freshwater shrimp boiled around him as he pulled his head above water. He dragged himself from the pond and into the tall grass of a breadfruit orchard. Somewhere up the cliff above, he heard the bullwhip snarl of the cat.

"Bloody impossible!" Rowan slurred.

He took a few stiff legged steps, but the cat had clambered down the rock and caught up with him. Like a scythe, the beast swiped at his legs with its fangs. Rowan parried but couldn't hold the animal back. Another lunge knocked his feet out from under him. The ocean-rock of a statue cracked his skull as he fell. He'd staggered into a hollow, ringed with ceremonial Tiqui idols. It was some ancient place of ritual Ragna had told him about.

"I can't. I haven't the strength!"

The cat crept in, its belly low, coming to finish him.

"I'm already dead you bugger!"

Grenades of yellow haze tumbled to the ground, filling the air. A few seconds, and Rowan found himself engulfed, unable to move anything but his eyeballs. It was dichloric-phenohol, the chemical the Bmur guards had used on the Mindre during his panicky escape from the temple of Viracocha.

Through the moonlit fog a person materialized, a feminine shape, tall, smooth and bald. She carried a weapon, an oversized rifle with an extended

muzzle for a gas canister. She walked up to him and stood, saying nothing. He rallied his vision for a better look.

It wasn't a woman at all but a mechanical human, articulated and smooth-white like marble. She knelt down. A cyclopean eye studied him curiously. The teardrop shaped lens was faceted like a bug and pulled to the side of its head. A panel of instruments emerged from her faux-breast as she clicked and chortled in a gibberish cant. Small pinpricks of light and lenses oscillated from inside, scanning his face and body.

Rowan wanted to holler but could only muster a sick bellow. After she finished her scan, the sensors popped back into her chest. There was a grill where a mouth should've been, but it'd no voice. She slung the rifle and with ambidextrous hands, caressed his cheeks and stroked his hair.

"Who are you?" he mumbled.

No answer.

An offshore breeze picked up and scattered the remains of the gas. The cat lay near one of the large Tiqui statues, writhing slowly. The humanoid unwound a few strands of filament from an internal reel and bound the limp feline like a sheep for shearing. Rowan struggled to sit upright but fell over onto his chest.

He heard the click of a hose clamp mating with his suit. She'd attached herself to his external spigot. Like a balloon filling with air, he felt the hydrokraft pressure build inside his chest until the siphon re-engaged, channeling the excess into spillover.

He slowly regained strength and propped himself up against the stone head. She was beautifully strange. He didn't know if it was a withdrawal

induced delusion or a dream figment, but it captured a feminine nuance that betrayed reason. In a few blinks, she was gone. The low hum of a vehicle approached then stopped.

"Let it all dissipate!" Someone shouted. Footsteps intermingled with inaudible voices, just out of sight.

"Hello?" Rowan hollered.

"Herr Guthrie!" Vidar hollered back, stepping out from behind a statue. His attendants were with him, scrambling to set up a portable cage. "You've met Smilodon Californicus, our saber-toothed tiger I see, our little experiment. We call him Storbitt for short."

"I'm imagining things, so bloody exhausted."

"You most certainly are not, Rowan. Storbitt's very real. Look!" They watched as Vidar's helpers hoisted the cat onto a makeshift hammock and slid him into a collapsible cage. The animal was still subdued by the phenohol, its languid tongue dangling like a panting dog.

"A saber-toothed cat? Surely you're joking, Dr Vidar Amundsen!"

"Such self-importance doesn't become you Rowan, to think yourself the only creature from the past to have had the privilege of resurrection from history's dustbin--"

"-How? That animal was bloody well extinct ten thousand years ago! It's impossible."

"The late Pleistocene era to be exact, " Vidar said pointing to the cage. "We figure Storbitt, sometime during the last ice age, had chased a most unfortunate giant sloth up into the esker tubes of a glacial headwall when the ice shifted, burying the poor beast and his prey in an icy grave. That's until a Surtur survey team, like the

one that found you, discovered him while excavating a Jotenheim ice sheets."

"Is the cat undead?"

"It's dysterfolk, 'dysterkatt' really and one of a kind," Vidar joked.

"There's something weird about him. I can't quite get my brain-case around it."

Vidar smiled wryly, said nothing and nodded.

"It was trying to make a go for me," Rowan continued.

"Hardly... not even a scratch."

Rowan looked himself over. Indeed, he wasn't much worse for wear, a bit ragged where Storbitt's teeth had torn the shielding. But besides a bit of muddy sand, he was spotless.

"Why would you let that monster prowl Forst Fodt, Vidar?"

"Part of your training, Rowan. I set it loose on you to teach you a valuable lesson about your limitations."

"What?" Rowan snapped, his vocal synthesizers rattling. "I'm not a wartime scholar, but I'd betcha' the Vanir aren't unleashing legions of prehistoric cats onto the suffocating deserts of Asgard."

"You'd be correct to assume that," Vidar smiled, pulling a cigarette out for Rowan and lighting it. Rowan took a few drags and stood to his feet to let a trundling knobby-tired lorry pass, his knees still wobbling.

"Then why?"

"A little exhausted you said?" Vidar asked, sidestepping the question.

"Bloody hell, am I."

"There's your explanation."

"I don't follow."

"There's an economy that goes along with the lung-gun. It waters down to the 'fight or flight' instinct. Living creatures budget this gut feeling based on how much worth their species' success has placed on their own individual mortality, but the dysterfolk have broken the natural equation, interrupting the cycles of life and death."

"You're confusing me."

"That nauseous sickness and that unexplained exhaustion?"

"Yes?"

"Firing your lung gun during range practice had critically depleted your hydrokraft reserves, and by the time you made your decision to flee, you hadn't the strength."

"I tried firing after a short sprint but collapsed, thought it was the weapon malfunctioning."

"It was working fine. It was you who malfunctioned."

"No pain or discomfort just debilitated."

"Dysterfolk are not indestructible. Given enough abuse, you, like the living, will succumb to damage and internal rupture. Lacking hydrokraft, the cellemaskin in your svartblod will lose volatile memory and become useless, making reanimation less and less probable with time like an irreversible energy decay."

"And to teach me this, you ambushed me?" Rowan smirked in disbelief.

"-A lesson you likely won't forget. To put it simply, you must choose your battles carefully. Not so much for your own sake but for the sake of your command. Necessity will force you to gain a brutal respect for logistics when fighting the Vanir. Your margin of error will be razor thin."

Inexhaustible energy is something you won't have as a luxury on Asgard. Every retreat and every advance must count."

"I understand."

"Good," Vidar said, patting him on his shoulder. "Everyone has limits, even the gods. And knowing your limits can salvage victory from defeat."

"Better to live to fight another day."

"Very much so."

Rowan wiped a smear of wet dirt from his armor and finished his cigarette. Curious, he strolled through the basalt heads looming in the moon shadow. The ancient Æsiri had carefully constructed the idols, paying tribute to their gods with ever chisel mark. They were wild and threatening. Just how the primitives wanted them to look, he guessed, filling their people the fear of things beyond the motus.

"Vidar," Rowan said, approaching him from across the hollow. "This energy deprivation, does it cause hallucination?"

"Not that I'm aware."

"Something rescued me at the last minute," Rowan said, nodding at the saber-toothed cat. Vidar's attendants were finished loading the cage onto the lorry and were getting ready to leave.

"Oh?" Vidar said, slyly.

"You, by chance don't have other oddities running amok on Forst Fodt? Something akin to a living statue, pale-white and glossy?"

"All what you consider an 'oddity', I suppose. This 'thing' saved you, you say?" he asked patronizingly.

"She fired off some phenohol, subdued the cat and then boosted me with hydrokraft. Took off before I knew what'd happened. The gas had gotten

into my eyes. Everything was blurry. I wasn't sure what I was staring at," Rowan said, confused.

"Maybe it was your guardian angel looking after you."

"Guardian angel? You're joking," Rowan huffed.

"Perhaps," Vidar stepped onto the lorry. "I must be going, Herr Guthrie, no hard feelings over my little 'surprise'?"

Rowan shook his head.

"I trust you can make your way back to the hosloft. And don't worry about your weapon. I'll have someone fetch it for you in the morning. Good evening." With a wave and a smile, the vehicle lurched forward and disappeared into the moon-dappled jungle.

#

The outrigger took some getting used to, but with a trim of the sail, the 'va'a' grew stable as they glided through the lagoon into the open Stillehavet. Ragna pointed to the horizon. The churning seas overwhelmed the guide star, but Rowan swore he spotted it, a small pinprick in the morning light marking the way to Bifrost.

"Am I making for it?" Rowan struggled with the rudder oar.

"Not sure," Ragna said, shading her eyes. "Don't stray far from the lagoon. The current's strong seaward."

"Just a few more moments."

Vidar had told him stories how the Æsiri used to navigate the vast Stillhavent using only stars. The natives placed heads of the Tiqui pantheon along the outer motus, marking Forst Fodt like a compass, each Tiqui gazing to distant points of the Æsiri atlas. At dusk, the seafarers sailed for guide stars, hovering just above the horizon. As

the Earth turned, they chose new stars as the old ones set, rotating like a celestial waterwheel. Sailing east was accomplished much the same but in reverse. Rowan thought it brilliant, no need for sextants, chronometers or compass. He wanted to give it a go.

The mara'amu winds picked up, heeling the outrigger to the starboard. He shifted his weight. The speed was incredible. The day-sloops he sailed in the 'Channel were slow and steady, chopping through the seas like a plow. But the va'a, a narrow outrigger canoe used by the Æsiri, skipped carefree across the waves like an albatross.

"Vidar said there was a small island near the outer reef, marking the way to Bifrost. Do you see it?" he hollered.

Rowan constricted his iris and peered off, searching for palm trees or the reef break. Nothing. He cinched the sail and felt another rush of speed. Rip currents boiled below as they shot over shallows. Rowan looked down through the translucent turquoise at the mottled sea-bottom speeding by. He was a low flying bird, a gull soaring above the waves ready to shoot into the ocean sky.

"Can you feel it, Ragna? The air lifting us!" Rowan yelled.

Nothing.

Rowan looked over his shoulder and noticed her huddled close to the outrigger's 'V'-shaped hull. There was terror in her eyes, like a cornered animal. Exhilarated, he'd neglected to notice.

"Ragna?"

She looked up, eyes sloppy with tears, salt spray clinging to her tousled hair. He thought of Anna and paused in a double take. Queasiness raced

through his core as disjointed images correlated and disintegrated like déjà vu. He reached out for her hand, but she was too frozen to grab hold.

"What's wrong?"

She shook her head, eyes big as saucers.

"I'll take us in, hold on."

With a tack, he swung the va'a in an arc towards the atoll and headed through a pass along the outer motus. The chop of the reef quickly gave way to the lagoon's placid waters, the ocean's roar growing distant. Rowan's experiment with primeval Æsiri navigation was over, but it didn't matter, the morning's stars had evaporated with the rising sun.

"I've never been in the open sea," she replied, calm now.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know."

Rowan pulled the sail down and folded it against the mast. The outrigger went adrift, wavelets lapping against the koa hull. He pulled an oar from the dugout and paddled the canoe to the white shimmer of a nearby beach.

"We'll recoup then head back to Forst Fodt." Rowan motioned towards a secluded islet near the motus.

Ragna nodded.

Rowan gave a few stiff paddles and launched the outrigger onto the wavy sand. Ragna stepped out into the shallows' liquid-green and helped to push the canoe above the waterline. Finding shade near a cluster of palm trees, they sat and rested.

"I'm ashamed," she said.

"No reason to be, that sort of thing can happen to anyone. You were just out of your element. The riptide took me by surprise too, I'll admit."

Rowan leaned against a palm trunk, lit a cigarette and took in the view. The central island of Forst Fodt painted a deep emerald swath across the blue tapestry of sky and water. The morning clouds had cleared from the island's central peaks, leaving behind tropical sun thinly veiled by horsetail clouds.

"There was a look you gave me out there," she muttered.

"With these eyes?" Rowan joked. "Hard to give anyone much of a look."

"You were thinking of her weren't you?"

Rowan paused and took a few slow drags.

"Your fear reminded me of Anna, from a sleep cycle dream."

"You told me, I remember. There's a slant to your eyes when you mention her, and your mouth opens slightly-"

"-That obvious, eh?"

"Only to me."

Rowan finished the cigarette, touched her cheek and brushed her hair behind her ear.

"She'd a way about her, a weird volatility. It used to upset me horribly."

"How so?"

"For instance, when I'd leave town, her mood would change to something like a puppy dog shut out in the cold, then change altogether again when I'd return."

"Was she afraid you'd abandon her?"

"She knew better, but she couldn't help herself. It was comforting at first, knowing she needed me. I used to give her my pocket watch when I'd be off on business or family matters. I told her to keep it underneath her pillow and imagine it was my heart beating next to her."

"Clever," Ragna smiled.

"I thought so. The only thing was, she never bothered to wind it," Rowan said, staring out over the languid lagoon. The both sat, saying nothing, letting the moment pass. Then Rowan spoke.

"I'd arrive home, and she'd hand it back to me, unwound and stopped with nothing but a shrug. She always did that, always made me feel like a stranger when I'd get return."

"Did you confront her?"

"Occasionally, but after a few days we'd exchange affections and forget about the awkward reunion. Homecomings were bittersweet and always so much work. I remember pulling into the train station and forcing myself to imagine her from my departure, full of tears, whimpering. I would pray that her enthusiasm had carried through, only to be miserably disappointed again when we'd reunite. It was like she was mocking me," Rowan paused.

"Maybe she was trying to punish you for leaving her."

"It was more than that, like a disdain, like I was some troublesome interruption, an interloper ruining best laid plans."

Ragna reached out for his hand. His voice trembled, sliding in and out of a metallic vibrato like a radio off its channel. Thoughts had caught up with him unexpectedly, bridging the millennium in a flash.

"Can I see it?" Ragna asked, pointing to ring lying against his bare chest.

He opened the watch chain's clasp and slid the ring off, holding tight to the ill-gotten data crystal. Refracted light freckled her face as she inspected the diamond. Getting up from the sand,

she waded into the lagoon, holding the engagement ring to the sun. Rowan grew curious and followed.

Before he could yell, she wound up and threw the gold loop as far as she could into the iridescent ultramarine. Rowan stood stupefied, incredulous and in shock. Like a spaniel after a duck, instinct drove him to deeper water. Coral and bubbles swirled around as he thrashed, looking for the descending ring. Nothing. In a panic, he scoured the fringing reef and coral crevasses. Something moved and caught his eye, a glint in the closing maw of a giant pahua clam. Struggling, he strained to pull the waffled mollusk apart, but it had sealed like glue.

Minutes passed as he fought the shellfish, until finally, Ragna slipped in next to him and pushed him away. He grew still and drifted limply into the backwash current, staring blankly at the seafloor. She hugged him and pulled him to the surface.

"Why did you do that?" Rowan muttered, water gurgling from the corners of his mouth.

"Let it go."

"You don't understand!"

"Her love was an illusion. You've known it all along."

"It's not true," Rowan said confused. He felt like a boy that'd just discovered childhood storybooks were always the stuff of the fantastic, never real.

"It is true. You were her surrogate, a placeholder. Something to be discarded and easily forgotten."

Rowan struggled, but Ragna's embrace grew tighter. He pointed to the water again and mumbled then let his hand fall back to his side. Resting

his chin on her head, he looked on with empty eyes.

"You've a right to be angry with her. Anger let's us forget."

"But she's gone. It doesn't matter. I should let go of her completely and forgive."

"But it does matter."

"Anger doesn't become me," he said, the watery words clearing his throat.

"You have to understand something," she said, her eyes alight. "I loved Ivar completely for the short time we were together, and the thought of abandoning him like Anna abandoned you?"

"-But-"

"-But nothing. That's not what lovers do. It's sadistic! If she'd really cared about you, she would've remained true or handed your heart back before she poisoned it."

Rowan smirked. "Is that what she did?"

"Is there a better word?"

"I can't believe that after all we'd been through, all the picnics, regattas and trips to the countryside, all the years spent together, that it meant nothing," Rowan rambled. "We were engaged! She'd accepted my hand-"

"-Human hearts are fickle. A thousand years hasn't changed them that much. Believe it Rowan, there's a small part of you that already has."

Rowan was quiet, trancelike, watching the undulation of the lagoon's liquid movement. One minute passed, then two, then three, time slowing to abstraction. Her embrace hypnotized him. Her life force wicked slowly into him like spilt wine soaking into dinner cloth. Anger mixed with decay, ebbed and flowed then slowed and stopped. Noisy

thoughts dissipated and fell away like a lifted curse.

"Say something," Ragna begged.

"I'm speechless. I don't know what to say to this Ragna."

"Say anything."

"Alright," he started. "... My kind saint took pity on me..." he quoted. "...and I blessed them unaware... and from my neck so free, the albatross fell... and sank like lead into the sea..."

"A poem?"

Rowan nodded. "Coleridge."

"It's appropriate."

She reached up and caressed his blue-gray cheeks, running her hands around the back of his neck and through his bristly hair. His body was frozen, still and unresponsive, almost afraid to move but indescribably liberated. Something had changed.

"Too much faith and always the dreamer, my mum used to lament my naïve sensibilities, used to tell me it'd be the death of me," Rowan grinned. "Ironic."

"Are you ready to go back?"

He looked across the water at their hosloft and the village. The morning fisherman had pulled their nets and disappeared, replaced by pearl diver skiffs bouncing lazily on the waves. The illusion of life overwhelmed him. His mind conjured smells of fragrant tropical winds and the warmth of the sand beneath his feet as life and death blurred.

"I'm ready."

[TD] CHAPTER ELEVEN

Rowan wiped the beads of water from the glass and took another look. It was the last time he would lay eyes on her. The picture tumbled from his hands and into the rain-pocked sea. With a splash, Anna's picture sunk into the lagoon. He looked up, eyes blurred by raindrops. The weather was moving in for the afternoon. Thunderheads dimmed the sky, churned by the rush of onshore breeze.

He returned to the hosloft and sat near the bed. The morning's sail had exhausted her. She'd been asleep for the better part of an hour. Like a warm fireplace, he was drawn to her, watching her every twitch and every breath -a landscape of beauty. Separated by a thousand years, she was the woman he was meant to love; he'd convinced himself. He couldn't help it, he wanted her -wanted to feel her in every way his cadaver could.

Rowan dilated his eyes to enhance the light. She moaned as she stretched. With a flutter of her almond eyes, she woke and looked at him from across the room. He got up and moved to corner of the bed. She pulled the starched sheets up around her breasts.

"How long have you been there?"

"Not long."

"You're not wearing eyeshades," Ragna said with a smile. "You always wear those eyeshades."

"They don't feel right anymore."

"About this morning... -Rowan, I didn't mean to upset you-"

"-I know Anna's gone. When you've felt a certain way forever, it's hard to know anything else. The heartache had frozen with me when I died... like a stain."

"Rowan-"

"Yes, Ragna."

She reached in and kissed his cheek and mouth, her arms wrapping around his neck

"Ragna, why?"

"I don't care."

Rowan pulled the sheets away and studied her naked body. Energy stirred inside his animal cortex. He felt it softening the membranes of his mouth, saliva-like fluid seeping out and over his lips. He put a hand to her breast. The cool caused her to gasp but she didn't pull away.

Black eyes studied her every curve as his palm traced the soft contours of her body. Rowan filtered his aural glands to sense her inhales and exhales, mapping her body from the inside out. A slow panic welled, his emotions restrained by impotence that shadowed desire with dead reality.

Her fertility overwhelmed him, but a mental disconnect like bulwark failed to bridge outer sense. He touched her but felt nothing. She was a gemstone, exotic but intangible to all sense but sight. With his fingers, he smeared the fluid over his lips and put his mouth to her neck. Another gasp.

He pulled her close and slid his mouth over and around her chest then down to the firmness of her belly. The fluid chilled her, goose bumps rose from her skin as an outside draft stirred with the rain. She shivered then relaxed. He struggled to inhale, hoping her scent would spark something human. He prowled her, desperate to absorb beauty.

Numb hands tugged and pulled at her hips and legs, pressing her body into his. He held her for what felt like an eternity, wanting but receiving nothing. He stopped.

"Rowan, look up," Ragna whispered. "Look over."

Her eyes were focused on the hosloft's open door. He loosened his grip and pulled away.

"Someone's here."

Surprised, Rowan turned around and noticed a girl standing there, the soft patter of rain masking her footsteps. It was Hannah, the pearl diver girl from the previous night. There was an allure in her eyes. Rowan had no idea how long she'd been standing there. The rain had soaked her hair into corkscrew tangles, the water dripping down through her sarong.

"I was coming in from the storm. Something fell into the water... I didn't mean to-," she stammered.

He'd an idea.

"Stay put. Stay there. Don't move," Rowan ordered.

Ragna's looked at him, eyes moist and incredulous. He leapt up from the bed and approached the girl.

"What fell?" Hannah asked nervously, looking back at the water.

"Come inside," he said, clutching her hand. He startled her. She started to pull away. "It's okay. Come."

"Rowan, let her leave if she wants," Ragna said nervously.

He tugged at the knot in her sarong and pulled her cloths to the floor. Hannah's protests waned but the two women's weariness of Rowan did not. Ragna shirked as Rowan led the startled girl up and onto the bed.

"Kiss her," he ordered, holding a quivering hand to his mouth.

"I won't!"

"Do it for me."

Smokey tears dribbled from the mucous of his eyes as synthetic saliva poured out the corner of his mouth. Hannah's breath quickened. Her eyes darted around like a caged animal.

"Don't be frightened."

The confused diver girl was jilted. The situation was beginning to overwhelm her. Like a tortured artist, he manipulated them into an awkward pose like still life.

"Rowan, why are you doing this?" Ragna pleaded, upset.

"Ragna ... I can't explain now-"

"I'm okay," Hannah interrupted nervously. "Everything's okay, isn't it?"

Rowan nodded and looked back at Ragna.

"Is this something you want?" Ragna asked.

"Yes, Ragna. Will you?"

Hesitating, she nodded.

Rowan slowly caressed the women, gingerly pushing them into each other's arms. A few anxious tears dripped from Ragna's lashes, her eyes fragile and nervous. Her reservations gave way. Slow at first, their hands touched and then their lips. Rowan eased back, closing his eyes to filter the sound of the women's breathing. An afternoon storm had moved on Forst Fodt. The rain intensified, drowning his ears with noise. He opened his eyes and readjusted for the dim light.

Minutes passed as Ragna and Hannah lay on the bed, their fingers and mouths ineptly caressing each other, bodies' stiff. Rowan sat still, intoxicated by the forced Sapphic energy. Like

clumsy dancers the women's bodies undulated and contorted in pubescent and immature eroticism - hands slipping in-between thighs, mouths on breasts. They approached crescendo when both pulled away. Impatient, Rowan grabbed their arms and threw them together again.

He leaned in closer and watched Hannah kiss Ragna -teeth pulling at lips, tongues sliding into mouths. Wraith-like, he crawled around the bed with voyeuristic fascination desperate to extort their inapt sexuality. He studied them like lab animals, prodding flesh with black fingertips, careful not to interrupt but close enough to provoke and excite.

"Don't stop," Rowan cried, his voice weak and warped.

More time passed -minutes fading to fractions of an hour- when the two noticed Rowan had faded into shadow. Ragna pulled away and crept toward his whimpering.

"What's he doing?" Hannah asked.

Ragna turned on a night lamp, bathing Rowan in white-light. She looked at him and screamed. Rowan, like a lunatic, was cutting himself with his field knife. Smears of black ooze streaked the calloused flesh of his forearms, the wounds deep and penetrating. Like a gut-shot beast, he'd descended into a raging fit. Ragna broke into wails, the macabre violence too much.

"I can't!" He hollered as he stabbed himself.

"Rowan, stop it!" She screamed.

Frightened, Hannah picked up her clothes and darted outside into the storm. Ragna tried and failed to pull the blade away and restrain him. Like a steam-driven machine, he was too strong.

"I can't feel anything!"

"Put it down!"

She looked at him. The cellemaskin had triggered a thermal reaction. Liquids seeped from the seams of his shifting skin, his mouth gaping like a drowning fish. The clip of self-abuse slowed but did not stop. Unable to take anymore, Ragna swatted the knife from his hand and sent it across the floor.

"My God, look what I've done," he whimpered. He gazed at the gaping wounds, filleted from the elbow to wrist. "And you... Ragna, I feel so ashamed."

"Stay put Rowan. Don't move."

She grabbed for the bed and pulled off a sheet to cover herself. Rowan buried his head into his hands as his wounds self-sealed. His sobs continued unabated. Ragna extended a jittery hand to his head.

"I'm sorry."

"Rowan, it's going to be alright."

"You're hurt," he said, taking notice of a small blood trickle running down her wrist. "The blade grazed you when you..." He looked over at the splattered knife nearby. "...knocked it away." The tension eased. The hosloft's chaos dissipated with the evening's cooling air.

"It's nothing."

"No Ragna, it is something. I owe you an explanation-"

"-Don't say anything," she shushed.

He tore strips from the bed sheets and applied a field dressing to her wound. He felt the numb pressure of her hands against his neck, trying to calm him. The air grew quiet with the clearing storm.

"I took advantage of that poor girl." He stared absently at the open door, Hannah's wet footprints still visible. "I didn't mean to frighten her. Did I frighten you?"

She nodded.

"I think I've fallen in love with you, Ragna. If that's bloody possible, the shambles that I am," he said, gesturing to his mangled arms. "It's just that..." he paused, searching for the right words. "...My intentions were honest. I didn't mean for to manifest so sideways and perverted."

"It's not your fault. You can't help what you've become."

"But what have I become?" Rowan moaned.

"I don't know. You were supposed to die for better or worse a thousand years ago, but Skjærsild interrupted all that and here you are, dysterfolk. They've asked too much of you," she whispered, agitated.

"There doesn't seem to be an alternative."

Ragna shrugged

"I don't know," she said shyly. "At this moment, the only alternative is what you are, now-"

"-Undead."

"Undead," she repeated.

"Do you love me?" he asked bluntly.

She smiled and put her hand over his mouth, shushing him again. "Love and hope are baited words. You have to be careful with them," she whispered.

#

The sleep cycle ended too soon. Rowan didn't feel much like dreaming, and he hadn't drunk the full dose of soveaske. The evening had been too much of a nightmare. He reached across the bed and

noticed Ragna wasn't there. He dilated his eyes and peered around the hosloft. Nothing.

His retinas flexed into infrared as he sped after the damp heat of her footprints. She hadn't been gone long. The jungle was a froth of bird noise and nocturnal chortle that swamped his ears as he searched for her aural scent. Maybe it'd all been too much. Maybe she'd stolen away and fled back to Midgard. Panic rattled him. He had to find her.

Ranga's trail led up to a ridge above the quiet village, overlooking the cove. It was the middle of the night. The moon loomed large in the northern sky, swelling the light as he searched the island's nightscape. There was another set of footprints next Ragna's, cooler and older, something on two feet but hardly human. He crouched to trace the outline, thin and hourglass, with a foot twice as large.

"Maybe the gods do visit their little island," he whispered.

There was a mumble on the breeze, a female voice mixed with mechanical drone. The sound was garbled but close. He snuck up near a stone Tiqui and hid behind a jungle fern for a better look. Over a field, standing on a small knoll, were two human silhouettes surrounded by coconut palms.

One was Ragna, the other familiar yet alien, tall and slender. He recognized Ragna's companion, the bone-white creature that'd saved him from Vidar's saber-toothed cat. Rowan had to refresh his retinas to be sure. It seemed unlikely, too fantastic. He stared on, unable to move and transfixed.

"They're dancing." He was stupefied.

Their fluid movement mimed one another's like mirrored ballerinas, patterns duplicated and step repeated. Minutes passed when Rowan noticed synthesized musical notes in the slow rhythmic dance, time changes, crescendos and harmonies, mixing like orchestral instruments. He wanted to creep closer, but he was afraid to disturb them.

"Never in my..."

His eyes faded into repose, soothed by the hypnotic choreography. Every subtlety of Ragna's quirks and peculiarities were amplified by the automaton's mimicry, the beauty of her movement feigned by the humanoid counterpart. Like wind through corrugated pipe, the creature spoke in droning notes, but what it said or why it spoke, escaped him. Ragna whispered something into one of its sensors, but Rowan was unable to hear, words and sounds discordant muddle.

Minutes passed, when Rowan decided he'd stuck around too long. Quietly, he pulled away and crept back to the village. He tried to digest what he'd just experienced, but he couldn't. He poured the last few swallows of Tormod's concoction into a small container of soveaske and gulped it. He wanted to contaminate the evenings experience, replace it with an actual dream. His weak mind overloaded, synaptic circuitry rewiring dangerously.

#

Rowan shifted his feet and heard pings of shattered ice crystal, the temperature well below zero. The reprogramming had relieved the need for soveaske, allowing him to skip sleep without risking psychosis. They told him he was close to full combat readiness now, his kuld-soldat chassis finely tuned.

It'd been days, maybe weeks, Rowan was unsure, but Vidar had told him time-distortion was crucial to the exercise's success. He looked around the compartment, nothing but pitch black. The more he switched spectrum, the less he saw. He was blind as a bat.

Vidar had designed the experiment as an endurance trial, to see how long deployed dysterfolk could maintain battlefield awareness. The deprivation chamber was built to condition a kuld-soldat for sustainability. The darkness, the still quiet and lack of sense forced him to expend hydrokraft efficiently. If successful, Skjærsild planned to deploy the system on Asgard to sustain conflict intensity. But for now, Rowan was its lab rat.

Without warning, red strobes popped their seals, igniting screams from electric klaxons. Like clockwork, Rowan kneeled to the frozen floor, opened a reinforced instrument panel and pulled up a console. It was a targeting exercise, align and fire an auto-cannon battery before the clock triggered.

His frigid fingers raced over the blue glow of the input keys, calculating like instinct. The alarm timing was chaotic by design, triggering at odd intervals to outsmart his reptilian rhythm.

The calculations converged, all targets locked and fully engaged. Rowan hit the trigger and watched the grainy image of intercepted rockets disintegrate into shards of synthetic light. Finished, the console descended back into the floor panel. The blaring sirens fell silent, engulfed by the ubiquitous pitch-black.

"Amazing," Vidar said from a hidden speaker, his voice fracturing the silence.

Overhead, a sheet of light cut through the sublimating mist as a lift pushed the floor up into the chamber. Rowan, dazed and disoriented, sluggishly looked around the staging platform. Melt water poured off his shielding, dripping into clumps of slush. He inspected the hollow flesh of his hands, no fraying or frost damage. It was incredible.

"One weeks, two days, eleven hours and astonishingly your reaction time and precision increased," Vidar exclaimed.

"That long? My mind... all that time and hardly a thought," Rowan stuttered. Vidar released a data cartridge from his shielding and loaded it into a console. Graphs and meters splashed across a screen. He leaned in closer for a look.

"Amazing. After half a day, the svartblod purged the excess hydrokraft back into the reservoir, quisi-hibernation. The programming took! How'd it feel?"

"Feel?" Rowan said confused.

"Good, bad, indifferent?" Vidar asked.

"Like a machine-"

"-Perfect survival at all costs, no anomalies, just refined sustainability under duress."

"Survival," Rowan agreed.

"It's not quite Asgard, but with the institute's limited capabilities, I think the hostile environment performed well."

Rowan shrugged.

"Forgive my tactlessness. I lost myself for a moment. I forgot to ask. How are you, mentally, emotionally?"

"I'm a little unsettled but none the worse for wear. Time lost its bearing as my brain blanked,

not really sure if I was asleep or awake. Emotionally, I felt absolutely nothing-"

"-By design, an induced reactive coma. If you'll have a seat," Vidar said, ushering him to a tendril chair near the lab's enormous window. "I just need to monitor the cellemaskin stability. It won't take long."

Rowan leaned back and looked at the ceiling. He recognized the layout of the lab, its bright lights and the looming service tower with its octopus-like array of tools and monitors. Vidar engaged an eye coupler and started the svartblod filter.

"You designed them didn't you, the katedrals, the engineering bays at Skjærsild?" Rowan asked, watching Vidar load a fresh hydrokraft canister into the svartblod siphons.

"I had a hand. Although I must admit, I'm no archetype of efficiency. Skjærsild's done wonders adapting my crude methods into working production units. Things around here tend to get cluttered," Vidar remarked, glancing around the jumbled stacks of test apparatus.

"You're passionate about your work. I never had much patience for scientific endeavor, better as an engineer."

"Comes with being an Amundsen, sort of a family trait. I can't take all the credit."

"Your Uncle Torstein?"

"There were others, but as a child I found his curiosity infectious."

"Were you disappointed?"

"Disappointed, I don't understand?" Vidar asked. He shut off the coupler and unplugged the siphon. Rowan shook the blur from his eyes and gazed out the window. It was midday.

"Disappointed he wasn't given his proper due?"

"Somewhat. He fought hard against the creation of Skjærsild, lobbying his few political connections in Ny Midgard to insure it remained only a proposal-"

"-But you work for Skjærsild," Rowan exclaimed, confused.

"All this happened years before I was born. If I hadn't studied bionecrotism, I might've studied tactical pathology, adaptive logistics or intelligence fusion." Vidar pulled a cigarette out for Rowan and lit it. Rowan thanked him and inhaled, feeling the boost of energy.

"Or climatology, like your uncle?"

"Maybe," Vidar laughed. "If Fimbulwinter had remained just fringe apocalyptic obsession, and the Vanir had found some less insidious pastime... But the prophecies of Ragnarok forced the Tyrians to reallocate resources to insure our survival."

"Nothing left for his research field then."

"It wasn't just climatology but a whole host of research that felt the knife. Uncle Tor' believed the Ny Æsiri were the sole custodians of humankind's scientific legacy, and he thought it inexcusable to do away with any of it," Vidar explained.

"And you?"

"These are desperate times and it's hard to argue with the necessity of survival."

Rowan nodded.

"Do you care what your uncle would think of you working for Skjærsild?"

"I'm an old man, present company excluded of course," Vidar said. "The search for truth is addictive. If doors are locked, I'm compelled to open others. I'm a man of insatiable curiosity but

not a politician. I'd like to think Uncle Tor' would understand."

"Science and art belong to the whole world, and before them vanish the barriers of nationality."

"A quote?"

"Woflgang von Goethe, ironically a German," Rowan smiled.

"You're well read, Herr Guthrie."

"My fiancé studied literature. It rubbed off on me when I was a student, one thing I'm able to thank her for. It helped to pass time in the trenches," Rowan said, getting up to look out the window.

"Manchester Institute of Technology, you studied civil engineering there?"

Rowan nodded.

"Manchester, birth of the industrial revolution and the first European city to reach a population comparable to ancient Rome," Vidar exclaimed, much to Rowan's astonishment.

"Impressive," Rowan said, sitting down again. "You know your Mancurian history."

"To be fair, your arrival in Midgard spurned my historical interest in the Western Anglo-empires."

"Hard to think of it as much of a historical keystone, bit dodgy and dirty as I remember, packed to the hilt with immigrants and the Black Country poor. Odd, but I used to miss it when I'd leave, the canal bustle and the incessant groan of the mills. It was a likeable gloom," Rowan said.

"Seems we miss what's familiar, for good or bad."

"Aye," Rowan said, finishing his cigarette.

Vidar pulled up a stool and both took in the view. From the institute, perched high on the side of the island's volcanic mesa, Forst Fodt revealed

itself, everything frozen yet transitory. The sun radiated off the lagoon like sheets of gold, the hills and shoreline dulled by the afterglow of a thunderstorm.

"It's so fleeting," Rowan interrupted.

"Unfortunately. You've been around long enough to see the birth of mankind's industries, and if the Ny Æsiri fail, you may see its end."

"How much time does the Earth have?"

"Not sure, like I mentioned, climatology and meteorological study has taken a back seat. The reality of Fimbulwinter's frigid invasion is consensus. I'd predict Forst Fodt will be fending off ice flows in thirty years, maybe less."

"A generation, not much time."

Rowan leaned back into the cushioned petals of the tendril chair, letting it adjust to his armor's bulky weight. He lit another cigarette, the sunlight heat diffusing the smoke. He closed his eyes, letting the rays filter through his lids.

"Thank you Vidar."

"The cigarette? Don't thank me. Thank your Skjærsild technician, Tormod. He sent them along with you when you arrived. Enjoy them now, oxygen's scarcer than water on Asgard."

"I wasn't talking about the fag, Vidar."

"Why were you thanking me?" he said, confounded.

"For your honesty."

#

The sheets were soaked. How they got that way, he wasn't sure. He no longer perspired, no fever or illness, nothing. She was gone again, a soft imprint left in the mattress next to him. He reached for a cigarette and watched the wind blow the curtains through the open window. He didn't

know where she'd gone, but he'd an idea. Ragna would be back. She always came back, sometimes waking him, sometimes slipping in unnoticed.

A malaise had interrupted his sleep cycle. Nervousness or fear, he wasn't sure. It wasn't a nightmare. Those were all but over. He must've sensed her absence. Sleeping was cosmetic. The programming had taken care of that. But like his cigarettes, sleep was a dose of humanity Rowan found addictive. His eyes were heavy. He rubbed them and noticed a clear liquid seeping out his ducts.

Outside, footsteps approached on the wood deck. Ragna walked in and slipped off her sandals, unaware Rowan was awake. Hiding himself in shadow, he fought back another bout of ugliness. He took a drag, the cigarette's cherry lighting the corner of the room.

"You startled me!"

Silence.

"What's wrong?"

He flicked the butt out the window and propped himself up against the pillows, bathed in moonlight

"Your face," she approached him. The dark eyeshades fell off the end table as he fumbled for them.

"I didn't know you could-"

"-Cry? An anomaly. Skjærsild has some technical explanation I think-"

"-Rowan-"

"-You were with that humanoid creature, weren't you?"

"It's not easy to explain-"

"-I'm sure it isn't. Nothing much is in this place," Rowan paused, putting on the eyeshades.

"I'll be leaving Forst Fodt for Bifrost soon. Vidar says the conditioning's nearly finished, the preparations all but complete-"

"-You saw the two of us?" Ragna interrupted.

"I thought I was dreaming, sleeping or something. I don't remember or care to be honest. It doesn't bloody matter."

"What's bothering you?"

"I don't know what I'm going to do without your company. You've been a part of this strange afterlife from the beginning. Back at Skjærsild, when I first saw you, I thought you were an angel delivering me from Purgatory." He got up from the bed and took hold of her hand, tracing the veins in her wrist. She pulled off his glasses. "It feels like I'm unmoored, adrift."

"I'll be there for you, in a way. -That's why I've been out at night. Vidar will explain it. You'll see," she said, wiping the fluid from his face.

"But only God really knows what lies in wait for us. I've never bought into absolutes."

She reached out and touched his face. He pulled her close and embraced her. Oily tears fell from his chin, wetting her shoulder. Closing his eyes, he clung to her. She whispered something into his ear.

Maybe his emotions had regressed back to some adolescent abstraction, mutated by death's corrosion, fate collided with pity like an unshakeable fever. He could never give Ragna a man's affection, but he didn't care. He wanted her, like he was responding to some reactionary brain chemistry.

"I can't give you children or satisfy you in that way, you know that-"

She nodded.

"But there's something I can give you," he paused. "A promise."

"Promises are dangerous."

"I can never marry you, but I'll deliver you and your people from Fimbulwinter."

Her gaze fell to the floor.

"This living twilight is a queer gift." He looked at the gray flesh of his hands, "-There's nothing left to lose. My life's been snuffed, invulnerability swimming in an ocean of frailty. A soldier minus his fear makes for different calculus," he paused. "I can't give you a ring Ragna, but I can give you Asgard and victory."

She closed her eyes and sighed, shoulders relaxed. He held her cheek in his palm, black fingernails stroking her hair. He wondered what she was thinking, relief maybe. He must've said something, but what, he wasn't sure. Puzzled, he pulled back.

"What's wrong?"

"You owe me no favors, Rowan."

"Millions of miles will separate us and for whatever reason, this short time we've left may be our final moments. I want to give you and your people a future so you'll always remember me."

"I can never forget you, Rowan Guthrie."

She got up from the bed and walked into a halo of moonbeams. Arms folded, Ragna said nothing as she looked out over the lagoon. Rowan's human rift, his detachment from flesh and blood, confused the intuitive empathy. He pined to be alive, if just for the simplicity of it. Like a clumsy boy in the throws of a schoolyard crush, everything he said and did felt awkward.

"Ragnarok... for me."

"-For everything you've given me."

"But I've given you nothing," she laughed humorlessly.

"The ember in my heart, I thought stubbed, is still there because of you. You've given me hope."

Getting up from the bed, he walked over to a small box sitting on a table. He pulled out the red ribbon of his war medal and rubbed the worn bronze. 'For Valour', he traced the words etched below the lion emblem. It'd been so long.

"I want you to have this," he said, reaching for her hand.

"But you've so little from you're old life-"

"-Just trinkets, I want it to mean something again," he placed the medal in her palm. "A relic, metal cast from Russian guns at the Siege of Svestapol."

"Were you a soldier there?" Ragna asked.

"It was before my time, a religious war fought over an ancient holy church, but like my war, the original reasons grew muddled. Excuses and rational are the easy part, it's the fighting that's the brute. But..." he paused.

"Rowan?"

"-No, take it," he said, clasping her hands shut. "Afterward, when we meet again, I want you to honor me with it."

Her eyes looked pained.

"-Make it a true honor. It never meant much the first go around, but I think if you gave it to me after Ragnarok, I could be proud of it again-"

"-I don't-" she stammered, her eyes welling. "I don't want it to be-"

"-It's not a ring, Ragna," he joked

He held her hands again, tighter this time. She started to speak, but he shook his head and put

his forefinger to her lips, shushing her. Silence filled the small hosloft they'd shared for months, their interpersonal unease, vanished. The Ny Æsiri were mysterious but Ragna, with a smile and a tear, could be read like a book. She was a breath of humanity in a suffocating world.

"You're very rare."

"Rare?" he replied, confused.

"The dysterfolk are husks, but you've more life inside than anyone at Skjærsild. You've faith, only if I could say that much-"

Rowan shushed her again with a cold finger, holding her close. He'd never considered 'passion' admirable. His life hinged on his ability to perform within the rigor of expectation and duty, but now, he'd nothing to lose. Passion was all that was left.

"-Asgard is a brutal place. It's impossible to think you'll be there fighting soon," she said. "It might as well be Niflheim." She looked at him in sorrow, tracing his jawbone and ragged bristly hairline with her fingertips.

"Those sad eyes they've remade for you..." she paused. "Whatever happens, don't despair."

"I promise."

[TD] CHAPTER TWELVE

"If you're there Storbitt, come out," Rowan whispered.

The jungle was alive with animal noise, the lower registers difficult to isolate in the audible muck. The lung-gun sniffed the trail ahead like a bloodhound. It was only a few minutes walk back to the combat laboratories, but Vidar's Plaistocene feline had taught him never to underestimate the element of surprise.

"Nothing today, eh? Vidar got you leashed? Shame really," he said, slinging the weapon. "I would've enjoyed another visit before my imminent departure-"

An exotic, yet familiar drone echoed through the palm forest. He made a reach for his weapon but held tight. Rowan recognized the sound, its lulling insect-like harmonies. Crouching near a fern, he staked out the trail ahead.

"Show yourself."

On cue, the creature stepped out from behind a grove of bamboo and stood idle. Rowan exhaled, relieved. It was the female humanoid, Ragna's nocturnal bedfellow and Rowan's one-time rescuer. Her nimbleness and efficiency enticed him out from the makeshift camouflage. This was not an entity interested in him for sport or conquest. That much was clear.

He approached her. The lush flora cast a jade glow over her carapace like a chameleon. Her lopsided ocular drifted in its oversized socket, surveying his every move.

"What are you?"

She responded with a slow breathless whistle, droning in harmony with flute-like melody. He closed his eyes and absorbed her electrical music. There was information in the notes, associations of structure with meaning.

"I can almost... like words on the tip of my tongue-"

The voice stopped. He opened his eyes and saw her walk away. There was something in her movement that beckoned. He shadowed the simulacrum's footsteps as he studied its mechanics, a mix of femininity and predatory grace.

"Stop!" Rowan hollered.

She turned, looked back and continued.

They arrived at the exposed brim of the ancient caldera, Vidar's research laboratories at its eastern edge. The creature approached a portal and entered the complex with a flick of its lanky wrist. Rowan started after it, only to have the door seal shut.

"Hello?" He shouted.

It was locked. He stood back and gazed at the lab's monolithic windows, blue sky and clouds drifting over its silvered surface. Depolarizing the reflection, he looked inside at the jumbles of ambiguous apparatus and experimental prototypes. It was a disorganized mess.

After several unanswered knocks, the locks opened and the door slid into the outer wall. He'd never been to this end of the complex before. There wasn't the usual din of the facility's automated hum, only quiet. From recessed alcoves, blue lamps flickered to life as he strolled down the corridor. The door ahead of him cued and opened to reveal an expansive chamber with a reinforced glass enclosure at its center.

Rowan walked up to the thick window and touched the smooth surface. Like the porthole of some deep-sea diving contraption, there was an oblique distortion. Vidar was busily attending to the humanoid inside. It reminded him of the katedral's trapwork. Tubes and couplers circumnavigated the female simulacrum like a svartblod filtering unit. It appeared the humanoid, although mechanical, was much like him, undead and sustained wholly by artificial means.

He knocked on the glass, but Vidar did not hear him. The transparent walls were too thick. The interior chamber had been hermetically insulated from the world outside. Pulling his hand away, he left no print, his body heat too weak to mist the surface.

Inside, the glass enclosure looked typical of Tyrian combat laboratories, a cluttered mishmash of intricate and alien machinery. Behind Vidar's workstation, obscured by racks of blinking electronics, stood a collection of man-sized cages. All were empty except one. Rowan walked the chambers perimeter and noticed a few fur tufts poking through the narrow bars.

Getting a better glimpse, he saw Smilodon Californicus sleeping soundly like a housecat. Rowan took a seat on a nearby sofa and observed the animal, its muzzle tucked into the cage's corner. Rowan gazed mesmerized. Vidar had told him the beast was dysterfolk, but looking at it now, it lacked the undead nuance of its human ilk.

Rowan crept up and crouched near the cat. A fog beaded the window with exhaled breath. Rowan shook his head, bewildered. The saber-toothed cat stretched and sighed, releasing blasts of soggy air as it descended deeper into a relaxed slumber.

"You've taken a keen interest in your former foe," Vidar said from a hallway intercom. "I apologize for my lack of attention. I hadn't noticed you'd arrived. Just a moment."

Vidar unplugged the humanoid and escorted it onto a nearby platform. With a flick of a switch, a lattice of light engulfed it. Like a clockwork automaton, the marble-white creature began to stir. Awkward and jilted at first, she settled into a routine of fluid movement, a dance pantomiming some forgotten martial art.

"Engelfrigg," Vidar whispered. "Beautiful, isn't she?"

"Very," Rowan answered.

Vidar suddenly appeared next to him, transported instantaneously from behind the glass. Rowan was oblivious, consumed with Engelfrigg's weird ballet. Like déjà vu, the grace of the humanoid mimicked a female elegance that reminded him of Ragna.

"It's Ragna isn't it? She's been running off to commune with this thing."

"We call it personality engramming, a transfer of an individual's traits into the synthetic neurons of an artificial mind. Abandoned in development, Engelfrigg is a prototype. The engramming is a process designed to streamline empathetic communications, a spark of familiarity to improve efficiency, an ersatz friend. As your caretaker, Ragna obliged us in our efforts. You're very lucky," Vidar said, motioning Rowan to a particular spot on the floor.

"Lucky?-"

Before Rowan could finish, the floor dilated and sucked them below, spinning them around and

launching them inside the chamber. Rowan stumbled for a moment then gazed at his feet, incredulous.

"For security reasons," Vidar said. "This was once a cellemaskin derivatives laboratory."

Rowan could only speculate how such a pneumatic mail tube for human beings insured security. Perhaps the Tyrians were afraid some foul germ, concocted from a synthetic botulism or the like, would find its way outside and do its worst.

"-Safety may be a better word."

Rowan shook his head, confused.

"So what do you think?"

A matrix of brilliant indigo pulsed to inaudible rhythms, choreographed to Englefrigg's foxtrot. She was taller and more sinewy than a woman. Her inventors had extrapolated on nature's original brilliance, building upon thousands of years of adapted stealth.

"What's she doing?"

"Engelfrigg's a savateuse, adept in hand-to-hand combat and skilled in a veritable arsenal. She's a perfect warrior and tireless. We wouldn't send off our prodigal son without a guardian angel, would we?"

"-Engel-" Rowan mouthed the word.

"She's yours Herr Guthrie, a loyal pet with human sensibility, someone to protect you in desperate times, a gift from the Tyrians."

"She's beautiful," Rowan said, studying her sublime grace. "Why not build an army of these mechanical soldiers? Why bother with the dysterfolk at all?"

"The Tyrians and the Ny Æsiri faithful claim prophecy beckon the Suncasapa to Asgard, religious duty and such, a war without proxy."

"You mean the Einherjar, fighting the battles of Ragnarok."

"All true, but the reasons are simpler. It's a question of economics," Vidar explained. "There's not enough harvestable hydrokraft on Asgard to field a battalion, let alone a 'Frigg legion. Engelfrigg consumes hydrokraft at four times the rate as a kuld-soldat, and the cost to produce such product is unfathomable. There's just not enough resource to build them on Earth, and no sustainable energy to deploy them such an extreme distance."

"War is money."

"True."

"You're most kind, Vidar. She's stunning, a mechanical Athena."

"Not to take all the credit, Ragna took great care in conditioning Engelfrigg's engramming, insuring a level of empathy only theorized. There's a breath of life in this machine, more than the sum of its parts. It's the least we could do," Vidar said, slightly cynical.

Rowan's empathetic sensibilities remained crude, but he sensed a look in the old man's eyes that told of regret and compromise, some unrequited longing.

"Vidar?" Rowan said, changing the subject.

"Yes?"

He paused, pulling the data crystal out from his shielding, "-This might be of interest to you. Something I found in Ytter-Midgard lying in the filth and snow. I think you should have it." It was the truth. He did 'find it' after all. Rowan pulled the container from his necklace and handed it to him.

"What's this?" Vidar pulled the iridescent gem from the mesh. "And why are you giving it to me?"

It was a fair question and one he couldn't answer. It was just a trinket, encrypted, undecipherable and worthless. He didn't want Sigurd to have it, for whatever reason. Sigurd was probably dead by now and regardless; there was something about Sigurd's fanaticism that stunk of cruelty. Vidar was different and after all. Torstein was his uncle.

"Tormod had a look at it for me. There's a name hidden microscopically. You need a key to open it." Rowan paused. "The name etched into it is Torstein Amundsen. I was going to give it to you earlier, but I had to be sure."

"Of course," Vidar replied, preoccupied. Sitting down near a bench, he inspected it closer. "Torstein you say? Does anyone else know you have this?"

"Just Tormod. He dismissed it as a useless antique. He told me to keep it as a souvenir, war booty and all that. Is it important?"

"I don't know, Herr Guthrie. My uncle left quite a legacy, now more of a cult. But I thank you. Not much left of ole' Tor' these days. There's been a concerted campaign by the subsidiary moguls to discredit everything he ever did. After time, he lost funding and was unable to maintain even nominal levels of research."

"What type of research?"

"Just rumors. Some in the family say towards the end he was working on a treatise, long-term climatologic projections. He studied solar epochs, how they coupled to upper cumulous modal oscillation. -Might've been something do with that,"

Vidar looked around uneasily and quickly dropped the crystal into a coat pocket. Rowan hadn't mentioned the Vanir to Vidar, but there was something in his eyes that led Rowan to believe he knew more than he let on.

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure," Vidar replied, happy to change the subject.

"The saber-toothed tiger, Storbitt. He's different than me, his body warmth-"

"-You noticed," Vidar smiled, walking over to Storbitt's cage.

"Dysterfolk like me, right?"

"Storbitt's experimental, not like you. Sverre, despite his smugness, has been very effective in procuring Skjærsild funding for this research. He thinks it his pet project. No pun intended. The cat's a product of hyper-Skikk, a hybridization process."

Rowan was trying to keep up, the concepts nebulous but intriguing. Vidar continued his treatise.

"We've re-engineered cellemaskin by duplicating its chemistry with organics instead of the synthetics, less mechanical and more biological. They're engineered to biodegrade inside the svartblod and reproduce themselves when they've worn down. Storbitt is half-and-half right now. We've tried accelerating the process for complete conversion, testing on simpler animals, but the shock destroyed them, causing dangerous viral outbreaks."

"The cat's more lifelike."

"It's part of the process. The organic cellemaskin regenerates the tissue more completely, reconnecting nerve pathways in

impossible ways. The svartblod energy conversion provides the added warmth, and the old lungs are used as heat exchangers."

"He can feel pain, pleasure?"

"If you gave him a nick, he'd yowl."

"So he's alive. Then he can die."

"You can die too -put you under a crusher, annihilate you. But soft tissue damage? Not likely."

"Can you convert me?"

Rowan's black eyes widened. Vidar looked at him wearily and noted his eagerness. Rowan could sense his apprehension at the thought. The scientist didn't want to say anything he might regret, giving a sense of hope where there was likely to be none.

"It's decades off. Human physiology is more knotty. Storbitt's much less efficient. He consumes twice the hydrokraft, and his maintenance schedule is unrelenting. Skjærsild is in no hurry. To be truthful, maybe someday but not now-"

"-Someday then," Rowan whispered. "That'll have to be enough."

#

Was she gloomy or just tired? He couldn't tell. The diomedea idled nearby, ready to take him and Engelfrigg to Bifrost. Ragna had showed to see him off. He stroked her hair, pushing a few dark strands behind her ear, her eyes swollen and troubled.

"What's the matter?"

"I feel guilty."

"Guilty," he laughed. "Why?"

"I can't explain it."

"I'll be alright. I'm lucky that way," he said with a discomfited smile.

"Lucky enough?"

"Sure," he replied confidently.

"Luck might not be enough," she said, deadpan.

"What do you mean?"

She shook her head and looked at him saying nothing, tears beading in the corner of her dark eyes. Ragna was being cryptic, and Rowan couldn't tell why. He wanted to hold her, but her distance shied him away.

"It's a war, Rowan. Things happen, horrible things," she said, upset but detached.

"Remember whom you're talking to, love," Rowan said, a mechanical vibrato leaking into his voice.

"Do you have the medal I gave you?"

"I do. I will keep it."

"Promise me."

"I promise."

"Alright," he said, the moment awkward and uncomfortable. "Thank you for your gift. Engelfrigg is most extra-ordinary. Vidar said the more time I spend with her, the more I'll understand her musical language."

He looked at Engelfrigg as she stood next to Ragna. Her movements were impeccably imitated, a slight twitch here, a cock of the head there, like a street mime.

"There's a piece of you in her. In a way, you'll be with me on Asgard."

"-For good or bad," she mumbled, avoiding his eyes.

"Pardon?"

She shook her head, shrugging it off.

"Vidar talked of a process that could change me, make me quisi-living. We could be together-"

She quickly shushed him with her forefinger, her hand trembling.

"Stop!" she cried. "You have to go."

"But Ragna-"

"-No."

"Do you love me?"

She paused. "-I don't know -And that is why you must leave now, because if I have to stand here and say goodbye to you again..." she said, tears streaming down her face. "Go!" She touched his shoulder and put her head briefly on his chest before pushing him away. "-Go!"

"All right," he said meekly. "Think of me. Try to send me a communiqué."

She nodded.

He turned around and walked towards the lift. Looking back, he saw her standing there, arms at her side, fists clenching and unclenching. He stood for moment and watched her, shifting her weight from foot to foot, pacing like a caged animal. What'd possessed her? He walked up the gangway.

"Rowan!"

He turned around.

"Watch out!" she stammered, "-Watch out for them!"

Who was she talking about? He patted his slung lung-gun and nodded. She shook her head. He shrugged, confused. Ragna was insinuating something. Rowan struggled to put the puzzle together.

"Them?" and then a hand grabbed his shoulder from behind.

"Herr Guthrie, or should I say Herr Kommandant, it's time for us to leave," Sverre said jovially, stepping down from the diomedea. Rowan turned around to look for Ragna, but she was gone, swallowed by the jungle.

"Goodbye Ragna."

#

The intercom informed them they were to arrive within the hour. Rowan hunched in his seat, anxiously looking out the window at the wind-pocked seas below. Above, the cloudscapes stretched to the horizon like an armada of floating sails as the diomedea's whisper-engines cut across the stratum. He constricted his irises and scanned the ocean, awaiting the piecemeal arrival of Bifrost. Squinting, the world transformed into monochromatic rainbows of vivid blue, interspersed with flush whites like a blurred vision of heaven.

Sverre was busy tending to his bureaucratic device, sorting microscopic paperwork in the electrical ether of the handheld console. He was never much for conversation, too busy with Skjærsild schedules and cost analysis to engage Rowan's childlike curiosity.

His interest in him, by this time, was product delivery. Rowan, this kuld-soldat Suncasapa, this dysterfolk artifact, had been the culmination of a bold project managed by a loyal company man, deserving of all Tyrian promotion. The implications and historical precedents had long faded into the noise of financial allotments and scheduling milestones. There was no time for such insincere friendliness now. Sverre would soon be Tier 4. No matter, Rowan thought, Sverre was a pisser anyways.

He gazed back out the window and spotted slivers of land, a narrow archipelago of burnt desert dotting the Stillehavet. Spartan, it was the opposite of Forst Fodt's lush tropical paradise in every way. How far had they flown?

"Bifrost?" he asked. Sverre leaned over and nodded.

"The outer extent of the atoll's training complex and proving grounds."

The diomedea's dirigibles inflated as the vehicle descended. Banking slowly, Rowan took in the view. Like a handful of the Sahara rising above the aquamarine, the islands' miniature deserts lacked even a single copra palm. Cliffs of red rock formed jumbled plateaus, surrounded by skirts of dune barrens, a burning wasteland folded into the size of London.

"Why's it so dry and dead?"

Sverre shrugged.

The diomedea headed for an airfield next to a set of skeletal launch towers. Complexes of reinforced garrisons rose from the blinding sands, intermingled with assembly fields and the anthill-like commotion of military drills. The billets had been doled out, and the 3rd Wave kuld-soldat's were ready for his command.

"Barracks for the undead, outlandish," he mumbled

The diomedea was making its final approach when Rowan noticed something familiar. A part of his brain, long dormant, awoke. He traced the lines in the landscape with a black fingernail, a labyrinthine trench complex threaded through cratered destruction. He knew this flavor of battlefield, like some forgotten nightmare. He blinked his worthless eyelids. Was it an illusion, some sort of historical reenactment?

"Christ in heaven!" he blurted.

"I'm sorry?" Sverre said, putting away his work.

"Is this some elaborate historical training?"

"These battlefields mimic the Tharsis Montes combat theater," Sverre informed him.

"Trench warfare?" he turned to Sverre, his dead features alight.

"I know," he said with a smile. "We're lucky to have found you, a sign from Odin. That's why the Viracocha priests blessed you as an omen, the prophecies of Ragnarok coming to fulfillment."

"It's a bloody impossible coincidence."

"Didn't Sigurd tell you?"

"-About this?"

Sverre shrugged.

"-I don't understand. What about the Ny Midgard mekrigers, the aerial weaponry? You can create fighting mechanical automata, but you can't overcome entrenchment?" he said, nodding at Engelfrigg. "A thousand years and no one's managed to wiggle out of this kind of stalemate? It doesn't add," Rowan exclaimed.

"That depends. You forget where this war is being fought-"

"-Asgard-"

"-Asgard's air is too weak for aeroplanes and dirigibles, and Mekrigger's and automata expend too much hydrokraft. Sometime during the 2nd Wave, the war devolved. Limited energy, coupled with Asgard's global dust storms and cold, forced our technology to be more efficient and self-sufficient," Sverre explained.

"Regressive combat. War on the cheap?"

"More or less."

"It'd be like Tommies and Huns goin' at it with claymores and halberds, artillery batteries swapped for trebuchets and ballistae..." Rowan found it absurd.

"The Ny Æsiri have had to adapt at tremendous costs, learning from brutal mistakes. We've been forced to conduct a prolonged distant siege without siege engines. There's been significant setbacks and we're desperate for expertise."

Rowan sat back and lit his last cigarette. Then it hit him. The familiarity of the trenches, the emotional connection of all that had been won and lost fighting in them, fit like an old pair of shoes. Maybe he was more than just a gimmick, a walking, talking religious relic. Maybe they did need his expertise, fighting a flavor of war not fought in over a thousand years.

The cabin lurched as the diomedea came to rest on the airfield. Air hissed from overhead vents, normalizing the vehicle's internal pressure. Inaudible voices crept in through an open hatchway. Suncasapa kuld-soldat in full fatigues and livery entered the cabin. One of them Rowan recognized.

"Ojt. Bahuus."

"Herr Kommandant, welcome to Bifrost," the soldier saluted.

"It's good to see you again." Rowan said surprised. "You know Sverre of course, and this is Engelfrigg, my security escort."

"I've only heard rumors," Ojt. Bahuus said, taken back by the towering ivory form of Engelfrigg. "An angel to protect you on Asgard. I suppose you'll need an errand runner as well?"

Rowan nodded.

"I'm fortunate to be of service to you, kommandant."

"Thank you, Bahuus."

They stepped off the gangway onto the tarmac. An afternoon zephyr kicked up a billow of sand from a

nearby dune. Rowan shifted filters, sharpening the contrast to see through the haze. More kuld-soldat approached, a few holding the dusty banners of the Lif Corps legions, the counterpart to Rowan's Lifthrasir.

A kuld-soldat kommandant stepped forward from the flag guard and saluted. Despite the backlight of the setting sun, there was something particularly familiar about his silhouette, a swagger of vexatious hubris.

"Kdt. Guthrie." The voice was distorted but recognizable. "I've only just arrived here myself, but we've much work to do before we ride the Rainbow Bridge to Asgard," he said, gesturing towards the launch towers Rowan had noticed on arrival.

"Sigurd?"

The dysterfolk nodded.

"But you're dead! You were dying not but a few months ago."

"-Undead now. A mysterious illness misdiagnosed as viral infection. It turned out to be something more."

"What?" Rowan asked, disturbed.

"No one knows," Sigurd said, aloof and detached. "It turned out not to be contagious, not yet at least. It got a hold of me too quick to spread, probably some crude poisoning attempt by the Vanir. Skjærsild's studying it as we speak. Whatever it was, they'll soon have an antidote, a sacrifice for the greater good," Sigurd said, a ghoulish smile creasing his pale face.

Rowan's mouth welled as his brain jolted with heat, so many unanswered questions. Skikk hadn't changed Sigurd's attitude in the slightest. It was like his soul had been seamlessly plucked him from

its mortal coil and reincarnated. Eager for Asgard, so much so, death for him was doubtlessly serendipitous.

"I see." Rowan was stupefied.

"By Muspelheim, we're here now, regardless. We'll soon be at Valhalla, Einherjar, honoring Odin and insuring Ny Æsiri victory. We'll end the Age of Ragnar together. Here's to the 3rd Wave," Sigurd said, embracing Rowan.

"To the 3rd Wave," Rowan whispered, stupefied.

[TD] CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The total strength of the 3rd Wave stood at roughly fifty thousand kuld-soldat, evenly divided between Sigurd's Lif Corps and Rowan's Lifthrasir Corps. The Tyrians had delegated supreme command of the expeditionary forces to Sigurd, whom Rowan reported to directly. Each corps was comprised of two heavy legions of ten thousand kuld-soldat with the smaller elite legion of Suncasapa providing the heart of the officer contingent and special weapons. It was a type of command hierarchy Rowan knew as a throwback to the pre-Napoleonic era, dating back possibly as far as Sparta, ancient but effective.

Kdt. Sigurd Asperheim's resurrection and meteoric promotion left Rowan bothered. Despite himself, Sigurd respected Rowan's command. If there was something his battalions needed, hydrokraft, ordinance, combat engineers... Sigurd wasted no time delegating logistics. He was too obliging, as if Sigurd sensed Rowan's resentment that he'd managed to weather Skikk without all the pitiful diatribes and weakness. Or maybe he'd found a counterpart in Rowan, a war-fighting foil worthy enough. Regardless, it was uncanny and unsettling. Sigurd's transmogrification was almost too perfect.

"Casualty status," Rowan ordered.

"Both legions are at half-strength. Suncasapa redeployed to flanking sikrings to reinforce. Lif 2nd legion is pushing through the High Dunes," Ojt. Bahuus said, staring into the bunker's battle console.

"Bloody hell! What's the elapsed time?"

"Two hours, forty minutes and twenty three seconds, sir. Should I reroute the Suncasapa commands?"

"Not yet. Idle the transmission buffer and load the following orders." Rowan looked into the battlefield's camera monitor. "Fallback to the forward salient and refortify auto-cannons-"

Training consisted of full-scale conflict simulation in Bifrosts' two battle theaters, Helvete, a parched dune-sea of intermingled trenches reinforced with sikring bunkers, and Feltskanse, a natural fortress carved out of Bifrost's volcanic massif. The daily regiment was grueling, even for the undead. It wasn't Rowan's idea of trench warfare. The landscape was familiar, but its psychology was foreign. Sigurd and Rowan jousted on a daily basis with armies of thousands, but unlike the snipe shots and over-the-top offensives of the Great War, battles drew to a close with lightning ferocity, leaving little time to adapt. The pace was just too quick.

"-New status reports from sector four," Ojt. Bahuus interrupted.

"Yes, sersjant?"

"Sector four subjugation reported in less than..." checking the combat clock, "ten minutes to remain, reroute aborted."

"Looks like this one's Sigurd's. We're one-for-one today." Rowan collapsed the monitor and looked out over Helvete. "This all needs to be slowed down," he sighed. The war game had stirred up dust, morphed into funnels by the eddying ocean winds. The atmosphere was murky, hard for Rowan to get a good view of the aftermath. A few kuld-soldat milled near the sikring trench, faces

expressionless and unwavering as they changed out dichloric phenohol magazines from their lung-guns.

"We can slow the purge rate on the lung-gun synthesizers. Sigurd and the intelligence liaisons might agree to it. It'd keep the corps' energies up longer, make us more sparing with our ordinance," Ojt. Bahuus said, looking at Rowan, confused.

"That's all so synthetic," Rowan said, exhausted. His synaptic heat was getting dangerously high. "Won't do us any good against an enemy that's not even dysterfolk. Look at those men out there, sersjant, that lahg, you see them?" he said, pointing at the squad of loiterers. "Look at their faces. Do you remember what it was like to be afraid?"

"Of course."

"-But do you really remember? Those kuld-soldat out there, Ojt. Bahuus, right there, do you see them?" he said, pointing through the sikring's gun slit, "stoic but lacking moxy."

"Moxy, sir?"

"The kuld-soldat are fanatical, no doubt, but it's spent so quickly. They're fearless to a fault, no hesitation, no second-guessing, nothing to muddy the immortal waters," Rowan argued.

"Is that so bad?"

Rowan looked over at Engelfrigg standing silently behind a communications transceiver. Ever the chameleon, she faded in and out of the burnt light, her ocular organ curiously watching them both.

"Maybe she can answer that." He turned to her. "What's your purpose, Engelfrigg?"

Disaster's cost with master's loss, too great a fate -must deflect and protect with wherewithal

and circumspect, she hummed musically.

Ojt. Bahuus looked on, dumb.

"What if you had to harm me, in order to protect me?"

The alarm of harm is of little sense, when assured defense bleeds grimmest consequence, she hummed, head cocked to the side, hands on hips. He translated best he could for Ojt. Bahuus, reinterpreting Engelfrigg's pixie tones into Æsiri.

"Would the idea frighten you, Engel?" Rowan asked.

Master misconstrues ideas feigning truth -fear of causal plausible deniability -negligible fantasy.

Rowan translated her whistles to his befuddled overbetjent.

"She's just a machine following her engramming-," Ojt. Bahuus said.

"-Like you're following your engramming, like the Lif and Lifthrasir Corps are following their engramming? We're both reconstructed, dead. The difference is, Engel was never alive. She doesn't have any fear of harming me, because she never would and that, sersjant, constricts one's options on the battlefield. There might be an instance where that sort of sacrifice is needed for the good of the lot. The problem is the dead have less to lose," Rowan said.

"More fear then, but how? I'm not afraid, none of the kuld-soldat are. Anyway, why would one of us ever have a need to harm you? You're arguments too hypothetical, sir."

"Is it?" Rowan's pitch black eyes widened, his mouth salivating.

Ojt. Bahuus shrugged.

"We'll have to learn tricks, synthesize fear, mimic it. The kuld-soldat had it once. I had it once. It's an abstraction now, but I bet there's some of it left in the frozen gray oatmeal. The dysterfolk reek with advantage, we just need to dig for it."

"We'll dig then," Bahuus said.

"Engelfrigg, upload the mission metrics for Kdt. Asperheim and issue the formal subjugation," Rowan said, pulling the phenol cartridges from his weapon.

Defeat, retreat -submitted, transmitted, she chirped.

"We'll depart for the operations sikring in an hour. Assemble the Suncasapa for the march back," Rowan ordered.

"Yes Sir," Ojt. Bahuus replied.

Everything on Bifrost was dead, right down to the soil itself. It was rumored the island had once been lush like its tropical sisters in the upper archipelago. That was until the native peoples had settled and spoiled the earth thousands of years ago. Recent entrenchment and cratering had exposed the relics of Viracocha Con-Tiqui, the god's followers long extinct from the far-flung Bifrost atoll. Deforestation and over-population had done them in at the peak of prosperity. Years after their civilization fell, the land never recovered. The copra palms, heliconias, and orchids failed to sink their roots. The birds of paradise never returned.

Rowan walked outside, climbed down the sikring steps and grabbed a handful of sand. So light and powdery it dissolved into the crevices of his spider-flesh like a sponge to water. He threw the remaining grains and watched the dust disperse

with the wind. A few strands of beach grass were all the vegetation Bifrost had any intention of supporting.

He looked out over the rolling dunes, just the odd auto-cannon emplacement and a lahg of kuld-soldat falling into formation, interrupting an otherwise seamless sheet of bleached sand. The sun grew burgundy and swollen in the western sky.

Something in his head spiraled out of focus, a feeling of absolute weakness. Kneeling to the ground, he held his head hoping the spell would pass. He checked his armor's purge valve, no leaks. Something had sapped his reserves.

Closing his eyes, he was one with the ground beneath him, an island of death flooded with the living dead. Flickering images of the world, past and present, merged into a continuous stream, warping life and death instantaneously. He thought of Anna and Ragna, girl-voices blending into one, a gentle hand stroking the back of his neck. He reached to seize the soft feminine flesh but grabbed nothing. He clenched his empty fist. What had brought him here, to the ends of the world?

Thoughts distorted into a mix of failing logic. The mirror of humanity clouded over, and the pale shadow of his unearthed self escaped like a fleeting phantasms. Salvation felt distant. Who were these undead armies, locked in a Sisyphean nightmare somewhere in a sea of time, unanchored from history? Opening his eyes, the blowing dust coated his shielding with a thin film. Something had its hand on him. He looked at his shoulder and noticed a set of mechanical fingers.

Pain induced your refrain?

"No Engel, I just lost myself for a moment. Some of that quisi-hibernation Vidar talked about,"

Rowan mumbled.

Must burn to return, she sang, offering her hydrokraft siphon to him.

"I'm all right. I just need to get up and get moving."

Fate of Rowan, alone, unknown -a quarry absent glory, Engelfrigg hummed.

Like a child's doll, she picked him up by the armpits and dusted off his shielding. Swaying for a moment, he regained his balance and reached for her hand. Holding tight, she led him over the dunes and away.

#

Skjærsild combat technicians had briefed them on securing their purge valves for proper venting during depressurization. Pictures flashed on the training monitors showing a few hydrokraft embolism mishaps, photos of shredded cadaverous gore meant to insure proper precaution. The techs handed out eye-restraints to cover their sockets in the event of an svartblod hemorrhage. They also informed them, should hemorrhaging occur, the reservoir liquid in the goggles would hermetically seal the eyeball in place to prevent further tissue damage.

The habituation chamber reminded Rowan of an immense bathyscaphe. It'd been designed to accommodate three lahgs at a time, a mass production facility for decompression conditioning. Like the entrails of a monstrous mechanical beast, low lying vents protruded through mazes of reinforced high-pressure piping, burping and excreting a wet mist that flowed and sank to the floor. It was ready and primed, idled for full operation.

This was to be the first session the kuld-soldat would complete in order to acclimatize to the Asgard's thin atmosphere. Tyrian command called it the flexing, a toughening treatment that insured total functionality on arrival to the surface. After a few more sessions, Rowan was told, the gases were to be fully mixed, the barometers tuned to the surface of Tharsis Montes, and the temperature dropped to minus 100° Fahrenheit like Asgard itself.

He licked the saliva around his mouth, his brain hot and anxious. Ojt. Bahuus fidgeted nearby, lips stiffened, black eyes gazing at nothing in particular. Engelfrigg, like a doting mother, lorded over him, insuring Rowan's harnesses and manifolds were properly secured. Embarrassed, he waved her away and finished attaching the last few sensors himself. Sigurd entered with his Lif Corps kommandants and took a seat across the aisle.

"Uber-Kdt. Asperheim," Rowan nodded.

"Kdt. Guthrie, a pleasure as always," Sigurd said, saluting.

Like Sigurd, his escort detail echoed his menace, square jaws with eyebrows thick and bristly like a chimney brush. He knew of them but hadn't given them a full once-over until now. They were Ny-Æsiri elite, veterans of the Ytter-Midgard guerilla wars and competent killers. One in particular had a sinister edge, a look so cold, life and death were mere permutations on the same theme.

Kdt. Rolig was a recent addition to Sigurd's inner circle, a gunnery sersjant in Ytter-Midgard with an uncanny knack for drawing Vanir fire at inopportune moments. He'd allegedly managed to drag a varm-soldat to safety but fell short in his

own bid, dying from blunt concussion trauma. Rowan gave him a nod. Rolig stared idly on. Rowan turned his attentions back to Sigurd.

"We need to refine the training regiment at Helvete."

"Getting tired of me already?" he said, smirking.

"Very possible but that's not what I'm talking about. There's a game I used to play as a child called Tic-Tac-Toe-" Rowan started.

"-Yes-" Sigurd said disdainfully.

"-You could play it endlessly. It was zero-sum, strategy reduced to simple statistics. No one ever really won or lost-"

"-And your point, Kdt. Guthrie?" Sigurd sighed.

"That's what Helvete has become in my opinion, one giant Tic-Tac-Toe contest, winners and losers fifty-fifty. Feltskanse is even worse, with victory and defeat just a matter of position. My point is that we're very good at fighting each other but not much else. We need to train to fight the Vanir."

"The Vanir?" Sigurd huffed, "Just kill them like insects. What else do you need to know?"

"First rule of war, know you're enemy. You may be privy to the nuance of Vanir psychology, but I'm not. I haven't a clue what we'll be facing up there. It's alarming," Rowan argued.

"Can you squash a bug?"

"The Vanir aren't bugs, they're humans and cunning-"

"-And without honor, just like bugs. They're a race that'll do anything to insure the survival of its species, no matter how low and cowardly," he said smugly.

Rowan shook his head in frustration and looked away. Sigurd was impossible. There was no reasoning with him. Whatever point he may've tried to make was lost somewhere in his endless well of hubris.

After everyone had been seated and restrained, the techs left the chamber, sealing the vault-doors behind them. A voice announced from a monitor that depressurization would begin. Quickly, smoky haze from the vacuum pumps dissipated as the machines pulled the air from the chamber. Hisses and hums grew faint, replaced by the crackle of radio communication filled with the idle complaints of soldiers.

The spidery weave lacing his flesh blackened his pale skin like a rot. Internal pressure strained and rippled through his joints as gas crept through derelict sinuses. Wheezes and pops contorted his jaw from the inside out. Rowan looked around. The legionnaires' faces, like his, had turned black as coal, their mouths open in chorus like fish heaped in a market. The eye-restraints released their greasy ochre and immediately fizzed like seltzer.

The worried voices of kuld-soldat intensified into belches and soft screams. Rowan found the experience unbearable and pinched his eyes shut, foaming the bubbles out from underneath his lids. He strained to mouth words, but his tongue had swelled like a sponge. He wanted to turn the wireless off, mute the voices, but he couldn't reach the toggle. He tried to call for Engelfrigg. Nothing. Like a bird, she cocked her head and surveyed the room. Then something rose above the din. He heard words. Somebody was saying something, but what? Why were they talking?

"Snikmorder! Snikmorder!"

Someone screamed. He opened his eyes. It was Ojt. Bahuus.

"Saboteur!" someone else yelled.

"Detonator!" shouted another.

With a swift kick, Engel's foot landed square into the neck of Ktd Rolig, pinning his head to the seatback. Swiveling, she leaned and seized his arm with a snap, breaking it clean off at the elbow. She grabbed the fuse from his hand and threw it down the aisle, simultaneously ripping open his chest plate. Fighting the nozzles, she got a grip and tore the plumbing from his ribcage as cinders erupted from inside. Rowan looked in awe as Rolig's head slowly tore from his neck under the pincer-pressure of Engelfrigg's alien strength. Fountains of svartblod vaporized from the low pressure, the rest oozing over the remains of his body.

It was like a butcher taking apart a sheep, a clinical slaughter rendering the dysterfolk into its constituents. She did it with an ease bordering on the fantastic. Rolig's face looked stupid and doll-like as his head rolled into the space between his seat and Sigurd's. Engel had found what she was looking for. She swooped up a black gooey bundle that had spilt from his gaping chest to the grating below. Releasing Rolig's body, she went to work defusing the thermite charge he'd hidden inside himself.

"Secondaries!" A menig screamed.

A silent sloppy explosion burst from the syrupy remains of Rolig's corpse. The ignition pack exploded, sending fragments of detritus speeding through the thin air. Unfazed, Engel finished her work and disassembled the bomb into neatly

arranged components on the floor, studying and cataloguing each part in her brain's gelatinous circuitry. Air rushed back into the chamber, amplifying the klaxons as they pulsed in rhythm with the emergency strobes. The portals opened and the techs rushed in.

"Help!" a voice wheezed.

"What's happening|?" another voice yelled.

"Sigurd!" Rowan shouted.

He'd taken the brunt of the assassin's fury. The shattered remains of Ktd Rolig had lodged in his shielding, his face stained with the particulates of the near-vacuum explosion. It could've been worse, Rowan thought, much worse. It'd been an audacious assassination bid. Rolig's intention was to implode the habituation chamber like a hammer to a bell jar, collapsing it on the Lif and Lifthrasir Corp kommandants, killing two birds with one stone. Engel kicked the bomb away and grabbed Rowan by the neck, her compound eye scanning for damage.

Engel slow to the quick -faster to slow the attacker, dull the disaster, she whistled in lamentation.

"You did fine Engel," Rowan said. "I'm all right, check Bahuus and the rest?"

She surveyed the squads, triaging a few menigs with her spare hydrokraft reservoir. Everyone had survived. The techs released the kuld-soldat's restraints, checking their seatback sensors for anomaly and arcoma vitals. As the vacuum bruising reversed, the familiar pale hue dissolved the black bruising until the blemishes had all but disappeared. Rowan's ears rang with feedback, sound distorted to pregnant throbs. Sigurd was regaining his wits. Froth welled from his throat,

staining his lips and gurgling out his nose. Incredulous, he looked around like a wincing dumbfounded child.

Rowan was stunned by the enemy's resilience and patience. This suicidal varm-soldat turned chameleon-undead, was beyond formidable, and he'd not acted alone. That much was obvious. Such a highly organized, well-researched attack required assets beyond a rag-tag group of disparate warlords and militia. This was something else, a hive-mind sacrificing one of its own for the good of the cause, no easy countermeasures and no simple strategies. The Vanir were an army to be reckoned with and fanatical. With such extreme tactics at their disposable, victory over them on Asgard was left further in doubt. And this was just a Vanir earthling. What of Asgard's Vanir armies, a much harsher and less forgiving world than Midgard by far? Wiping the black svartblod from his shielding, he grew calm.

"Something in insects seems to be alien to the... psychology of this world... more monstrous... more infernal than our own," Rowan quoted, eye's fixed on Sigurd.

"A true gift for the quotes, Herr Guthrie... however inappropriate," Sigurd said as he lurched up from his seat.

"Inappropriate?"

"I'd say! Look around! See that pile of grease right there?" Sigurd pointed to the remnants of Kdt. Rolig. "He almost retired us. If you haven't noticed, we've been attacked, by Odin!"

"My eyes are wide open. Why don't you open yours?"

"What in Niflheim are you carrying on about?"

"Insects, Sigurd, insects."

"Kdt. Guthrie, no more wordplay."

"If I may quote you this time," Rowan said.

"Can't this wait?" Sigurd said, dazed and baffled.

"No, it can't."

Sigurd shook his head in disbelief.

"What specialty does one need to squash insects?"

Sigurd shook his head, a fire flickering in his swollen eyes. He pushed away a tech attending to his severed finger and faced Rowan. Something stirred, strings of their strained rapport pulling taught. Rowan held his words, dripping with contempt. He had to maintain himself, but Sigurd was making it near impossible, like an antagonistic itch that needed scratched.

"Hell of an insect, eh?" Rowan said at last, scraping a glob of Rolig's gut from his shielding and flicking it to the ground, "Smallest bugs are always the most poisonous."

"Another quote?"

"No," Rowan sighed. "No more quotes."

Sigurd motioned his contingent and the lahgs to leave the chamber. Awkward seconds passed, their eyes locked, waiting for the other to blink. Both wanted to yell but kept quiet instead. After a tedious minute, Sigurd looked down at the unexploded bomb Engel had disassembled and inventoried. He picked up the thermite pack and inspected it. His eyes grew wide and curious.

"All right, Kdt. Guthrie, duly noted," Sigurd said at last, calm and cool. Their confrontation had died to a fizzle. Sigurd had finally blinked.

"Sigurd, before the next Feltskanse skirmish, I want to meet with the Asgard liaisons. I want to know everything, tactics, weapons, and logistics,

everything there is to know about the Asgard Vanir. Understood?" Rowan said.

"I'll arrange it."

#

The grainy image flickered like a snowstorm. The film repeated to the same end, replaying over. Rowan looked on fascinated. It wasn't what he'd expected. Rocky deserts, knee-high sand dunes and distant mountains blurred together in monochrome as the shaky camera struggled to focus. Through the eyes of the ill-fated Lahg 17, Rowan saw his first glimpses of Asgard, a snippet of footage known infamously as the The Lahg 17 Event. He leaned forward, intrigued.

There wasn't much in the beginning, a lahg of 2nd Wave kuld-soldat patrolling an otherwise empty plain in search of something, dark blotches navigating an otherworldly twilight. He watched the menigs walk over a rise and into a dry canal, poking and prodding at the backscatter debris left from a mortar impact. Something caught their eye, phosphorous residue burning nearby. The film followed the white-hot glow.

The camera grew shaky as the undead soldiers jogged over the broken ground. They approached and gathered around a fiery blur of an incinerated corpse, immolated by its comrades. A menig pointed to the horizon towards a frantic silhouette of a Vanir, fleeing the impromptu cremation. The kuld-soldat raised their weapons and fired their lung-guns at the escapee, sending the enemy cart wheeling to the ground. There was inaudible elation in the gesticulations of the Lahg 17 menigs. They quickly abandoned the molten detritus at their feet and sprinted for their quarry. They

circled and gazed down at the fallen, disabled by a grievous leg wound but still alive.

The enemy unexpectedly thrust a fist into the air, holding tight to something while reaching for the seals of its helmet with his free hand. A menig leapt down to stay the captive's hand but was too late. A poof of dust engulfed its head as the helmet's precious atmosphere escaped. The camera jostled closer to catch a better glimpse. Rowan sat up. This was the interesting part.

For a few seconds, its face was visible, a man's face but different. Welts erupt under the eyes, blood boiling and lips swelling from the drained atmosphere. It was a face completely unlike any Ny Æsiri, pale white, eyes the color of alpine lakes and blonde-white hair. Who is he, Rowan ruminated, a Hun? Maybe it was nothing like that at all, maybe the light of the distant sun had sapped their pigment, or they'd suffered the effects of some inbred albinism.

As the man died, he let go of what he'd been holding. The camera zoomed in. A flashing light pulsed from an egg-like object, a grenade. The menigs panicked, reaching desperately to pitch it away. The cameraman stepped back and turned to run. Seconds passed until a bright light swallowed everything, knocking the screen into static.

"That's it?" Rowan said, leaning back into the tendril chair.

"That's all, Kdt. Guthrie, the first Vanir assault of its kind, a different sort of offensive. They briefly overran one of our high-gain communication hubs--"

"-I'm unfamiliar."

"-A wireless link between Valhalla and Earth--"

"-I see."

Einar, Bifrost's chief Asgard intelligence officer, hidden underneath the black folds of his full-length robe, sat in the corner like a monk from another world. Rowan gazed under his hood and saw a pair of gibbous goggles staring back at him. Undead for the better part of a century, he'd spent his many years stationed on the atoll, sifting through the voluminous military dispatches transmitted from Valhalla. He'd once served in the 2nd Wave kuld-soldat legion and was an encyclopedia of all things arcane in the history of Asgard's long-drawn-out war.

"The Vanir assailants held the emplacement for just under two hours but managed to obtain celestial routing codes, which they used to send communiqués out on time-release. Only Loki knows what they sent. It was scrambled. Bifrost was eclipsed at the time, Midgard obtained some of the data envelopes but failed to decipher the packet."

"When was it sent?"

"Five or six months ago."

"Close to my arrival in Midgard," Rowan wondered, whispering to himself.

"Pardon?"

"A coincidence," Rowan said, unaware his mumblings were audible. He quickly changed the subject. "I don't think I've ever seen a picture of Asgard."

Einar nodded.

"What's it like?" Rowan asked, curious.

"What do you mean?" he replied, his voice ragged, guttural and electronic.

"I've never met anyone who's returned from Valhalla."

"And you won't, I've never been--"

"-What about the 2nd Wave?" Rowan said, pointing to the dark screen.

"Skikk was cruder in my day, dangerous with a low rate of success, many did not survive it," Einar said, gesticulating. "There was much attrition, four to five varm-soldat for every one kuld-soldat fielded. But many of us were willing to pay the price for immortality in order to serve."

"If you'll excuse my curiosity, but may I ask what happened?"

"You're familiar with the flexing?"

"I've just completed the initial treatments. We were ambushed in the chamber, a Vanir partisan had infiltrated Sigurd's command."

"I heard, very distressing. The Ytter-Midgard Vanir are something altogether intriguing. A topic for another time," Einar said, holding his hands together like a tribal shaman. "Anyway, the flexing did not take. There were multiple-," he paused, "-ruptures in my chassis, making me unsound for the crossing. The Longship Masters would not have me. I could hardly blame them, I was barely ambulatory at the time."

"My apologies."

"No apologies necessary. I've been privileged to fill the role the Suncasapa and the Tyrians have designed for me. This being one of them," Einar said, motioning to the briefing room's oversized screen.

"That is a nasty slice, there." Rowan pointed to the screen. "They're a clever lot, the Asgard Vanir. Why the effort to burn the dead, especially peculiar, and the whole bit with the grenade?"

"The same reason we've never been able to detain a Vanir. They don't allow themselves to be

captured. They're fanatical about it. Valhalla's fully equipped with climactic hosloft holding cells, been there since the beginning of the 2nd Wave, but they've sat empty all these years," he said, gesturing at the screen, "-This is as close as we've got to a viable prisoner."

"Zealous, with a hell of a constitution for a field soldier."

"Due to the nature of the conflict, we find ourselves unable to procure prisoners. On the rare occasion we take ground, their dead have either been removed or incinerated," he said, motioning towards the frozen image on the wall. "They are tenacious when it comes to the dead, almost religious, as if they believe we're going to steal their souls off to Nilfheim or something. Such adherence to ritual may be exploitable, traps and ambushes of such things, but the key ingredient has always been missing: their dead. We've even gone to the extent of baiting them but to no avail. They always know. They've a sense about them."

"Uncanny."

Rowan got up to pace the room. "That Vanir, he was Caucasian like me. Where'd he come from, and how'd he get there?"

"Secrets of the 1st Wave, Herr Guthrie. Not even the elder Tyrians know the history of the Asgard Vanir completely. The 1st Wave were really no more than an exploratory force sent to establish a Ny Æsiri presence on a possible habitable world, their quest, a result of the Ragnarok prophecies and the Fimbulwinter's ice-death. They failed and were wiped out more than a century ago, our first claim to Valhalla, aborted. Little did the Tyrians

know, Loki had already arrived with his Fenrir ilk, bent on a reign of Vanaheim."

"Regardless," Rowan said, confused. "They must've departed Earth on their own longships. There must be another Bifrost somewhere over the oceans of water and ice."

Einar shrugged, his expressions hidden behind a mask of featureless black.

"We are few Herr Guthrie, ten million Æsiri or so. The Earth is enormous, our fleet of diomedes inadequate. We're barely able to keep our glacial maps current before they shift underneath us. There may be other 'Midgards', other enclaves, but the chances of discovering them are little to none."

"But the Ytter-Midgard Vanir are coming from somewhere near, maybe Jotenheim or some island group not far-off, but hidden by the Stillehavet," Rowan said, frustrated.

"True, but they may've infiltrated into Ytter-Midgard years ago," Einar said. It was as if he was reading from a script culled from The Edda, an explanation for everything. The Ny Æsiri were enslaved by their fundamentalist mythos. A fundamentalist interpretation of ancient religious text had reduced their intelligence apparatus to divination. Rowan grew disconcerted.

"Very interesting, thank you," Rowan said politely. Einar and the Ny Æsiri's devotion to The Edda, used to rationalize the conflict, weren't going to help Rowan command the battlefield. This had been a waste of time. He would have to come to his own conclusions.

"Can you forward me any tactical data you have regarding 2nd Wave operations and logistics?"

"Of course, and if you should need anything..." Einar said, reaching for his hand. Rowan shook it, finding barely a grip to hold. Death had not been kind to him. God only knew what shambling hodgepodge of animated meat lay underneath.

"Thank you, Einar. This session has been illuminating."

Rowan walked out the door and down the hallway, mulling over the briefing. There wasn't much tactically, no game theory to amass, no silver bullet or Vanir 'Achilles Heal.' The Asgard enemy practiced a brutal form of warfare indeed, but there was something more, some devil in the details he couldn't put his finger on. From Einar's assessment, 'The Lahg 17 Event' had been an aberration, a uniquely zealous attack in which the Vanir had risked violating what appeared to be their golden rule: never allow oneself or one's comrades to be captured. The kuld-soldat had gotten close, too close apparently.

When he arrived, Engel and Ojt. Bahuus were looking out the windows of an observation lounge, the room bathed in a white-hot light. It was the first of the longships to be launched. The rockets had just been ignited, their flames sputtering with sun-like intensity. Engel informed him it was a logistical shipment destined for Valhalla, delivering the 3rd Wave arsenal ahead of the kuld-soldat deployment. It would arrive a few months in advance, packed with lung-guns, svartblod filters, the Muspel condensate recipe, spare corpse shielding and everything else they'd need to sustain the 3rd Wave until victory.

"I was far too young, but my great grandfather remembered watching the 2nd Wave launch from the streets of Ny Midgard, everybody crowded around

the viewing walls. The longships were different back then, not so elegant, more bulky, clumsy and smaller. A few burst apart in the sky, much to everyone's horror," Ojt. Bahuus said.

"How old were you?" Rowan asked.

"When I was conscripted? Seventeen, I was just a few months short of my eighteenth birthday, the age of mandatory service. I didn't mind. Ny Æsiri varm-soldat service is a privilege. I couldn't wait to serve the Tyrians and Midgard."

"And when you fell in battle, how old?"

"Twenty, but my soul was ready," Ojt. Bahuus said, eyes attenuated and focused on the fountain of fire and smoke. Rowan took a look. He'd never seen such a spectacle. The crackling rumble of the longship engines rippled through the floor in waves, rocking his synthetic guts like an acoustic air hammer.

"What about a sweetheart, your family?"

The overbetjent shrugged. "I miss the notion, but there's not much I can do about it." He smiled strangely.

Rowan looked at the sersjant. Beyond the ghoulish exterior, he was just a boy, an adolescent. Rowan couldn't help but think of the young Tommies he'd led to victory at Ypres a millennium ago. That lot was never given a second chance, no Skikk to resurrect them. Regardless, a soldier was always a soldier time incarnate, young and full of invincible bravado that feigned courage, a sheer ignorance of consequence. It may've been true that old soldiers never die... but when a young soldier died, they bled the sins of the world.

"I'm sorry."

Ojt. Bahuus shrugged politely.

The longship teetered as it lifted off from the support tower. Water vapors engulfed the rocket in a billowy white tornado. Rowan watched as it accelerated into the afternoon sun, its engines so bright the Stillehavet shimmered with lightning intensity. The contrails dispersed with the wind, expanding outward and upward.

"Do you see it?" Ojt. Bahuus hollered.

Rowan adjusted his chromatic filters.

"I see it."

The rocket exhaust left a sinewy cloud that swelled in the atmosphere. The post-ignition recombined the hydrokraft into its watery constituents, forming a rainbow that painted the blue sky with veins of color. It was beautiful, like visual poetry.

"...Has it not been told thee, that the gods made a bridge from earth to heaven, called Bifröst ... ye call it 'rainbow'," Ojt. Bahuus quoted. "The Edda, the Gylfaginning, It's my favorite stanza. I never thought I'd see it with my own eyes, The Bridge of Thor..." he shook his head in awe.

The myth had taken hold of him, and to a certain extent, Rowan as well. It was hard to dismiss. A few minutes passed when the rocket's sparkle faded completely. Behind the first, Rowan saw another tower, its gangly scaffold crawling with machinery, prepping the launch site for the next longship. The 3rd Wave had begun. The Longship Masters were wasting no time.

Enough rocket-play, onward games this day, opponent's wait lest we delay. Take heed to succeed -no need to seed fields of defeat. Aim to break the cycle's game -things aren't set to be the same. Time to daunt the haunt -they won't suspect or detect dark designs to redirect.

"Aye, Engel. It's time," Rowan said.

He closed his eyes and thought of Ragna but couldn't remember her. He knew Anna's face still, bright as day, the blonde curls, the girlish smile, and blue eyes vivid like cobalt. But Ragna was different. He could picture her from afar, a slender nebulous form walking a deserted beach. Close in, her features slid away like ice on a skillet. She was stunning, a Polynesian princess, but the foggy lens of time distorted and blurred memory.

Only if he'd kept a photograph... Instead he'd Engel, a pale doppelganger of Ragna's quirks, the sway of her walk, a subtle cock of the chin and the occasional hand on hip. He longed for more. Engel was a postcard filling the gaps, just enough to fuel the longing but nothing more. Clenching his fists, he reopened his eyes. The battle was about to begin.

[TD] CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"-Spiders? -A few here and there. I used to stalk the hosloft towers for bugs as a boy, anything I could put in a box. I'd find a few, usually close to the heat exchangers. They loved warmth and the wet-dark in between," Ojt. Bahuus said, fixing the straps and tubes of his shielding.

"And the webs?" Rowan asked.

"A few, not many flies in Ny Midgard. Ytter-Midgard used to be good for that, all that filth and decay. There, a spider could live its entire life there on lice and larva, no web weaving needed," Bahuus joked. "I used to guard Eir delousing stations as a menig. By Odin and the gods, I'd never seen Mindre so infested. -Nasty business."

"We'd get the trench-louse carried in by vermin, bloody rife. A few Tommies went mad from the itch, shaved themselves bald. Couldn't blame them, came close myself," Rowan said, getting up from his tendril chair. The sikring command bunker was empty. The logistical control still needed a few workarounds to network the hydrokraft monitors. The battle-scrimmage wouldn't begin for an hour or more.

Rowan continued. "I remembered having a bit of fun with a garden spider once, laid up in a bunker with the Spanish Flu. I was out of my mind and found myself gazing at its web, just a few shafts of light, not much else and too dark to see the creature. It was lurking somewhere in my periphery."

"Afraid it'd bite?"

"Wasn't sure, had a few hallucinations from the high fever but no paranoia. Boredom was the worse. Regardless, I pulled the bayonet from my Enfield and poked at the web silk, giving it a bit of a tweak to mimic a fly. And then I saw her emerge from the dark, coming out to inspect."

"Then what?"

"I swatted her-"

Ojt. Bahuus looked up. "I see, and...?"

"I just swatted her. Not sure why, but it gave me an idea. These scrimmages, games in the guise of combat... If winning them is the most important thing to Sigurd, then so be it. The Lifthrasir will give him what for. I believe I can set a trap like I did that spider," Rowan said.

Bahuus went back to his preparations, loading a phenohol cell into the side reservoir of his lung gun. He shook his head and looked at Rowan.

"I don't understand."

"There's no a worse enemy in battle than hubris. I've seen it. I know its damage, poor planning, lack of contingency, and ignorance of the enemy, the trappings of military disaster. Asgard will ruin us unless I make an example out of the Uber-Kommandant. I need to offset the equation, swing the pendulum in the other direction. I've come up with a trap I think will work," Rowan said. He could see Ojt. Bahuus was puzzled.

"The Suncasapa legions are with us, the Lif and Lifthrasir Corps, the 3rd Wave, all of them. Odin and Frigga will grant victory over the Fenrir hordes. The Edda prophesizes victory at Ragnarok." He shook his head. "Tricks? If you don't mind me saying, tricks are the doings of Loki and the Vanir."

"Exactly, Bahuus. The 2nd Wave's been slogging it out on Asgard for the better part of a century and nothing, stalemate. All this righteous talk doesn't make up for a calculated tactical strategy. The Edda's not going to help you kill your enemy faster, regardless of whether Viracocha willed it or not. All this talk..." he paused, careful of his words, "-Was it any different back in the days before the 2nd Wave crossing? Did your great-grandfather remember rumors of divine prophecy and Viracocha's return?"

"I was just a boy."

"I bet he'd heard it much the same. I've my suspicions that sort of talk's been rode hard and put away wet. Something needs to give. The Vanir are not rag-tag partisans. They're formidable. Any lot willing to audaciously sacrifice their lives, whether out of zealotry or out of desperation, can bleed this army dry. It won't matter what firepower we spit at them. Where there's a will... and they've manic determination. They're fully capable of defeating us. If Sigurd refuses to accept this, then I'll teach him." Rowan lifted the shutters of the sikring and looked out. "Now's the time to stem the tide."

Feltskanse Head was a massif of cave-riddled rock connected by an anthill network of tunnels. It was the Asgard siege 'scenario', a possible Vanir stronghold the kuld-soldat might encounter on Tharses Montes. The Lif and Lifthrasir Corps had swapped sides so many times Rowan forgot the skirmish count. The corps took turns defending the redoubt. Just like clockwork, each assault predictably ended with the defender's victory and the attacker's subjugation. Nothing was gained, nothing learned, an exercise in futility. Sigurd

relished it like a boxing bout, but Rowan found it exhausting, nothing but 'bloody knuckles'. It was even rumored Sigurd timed the events like a foot race, all impossibly frustrating.

As the assault force, Rowan's legionnaires dug in around Feltskanse Head's crescent-shaped trenches. On the lower escarpment, below the snout of Bifrost's cordillera, there wasn't much cover. The trenches and saps were exposed to the arc-fire from above. Attackers had to move swiftly or risk death by a thousand cuts, victims of attrition at the hands of phenohol snipers and grenadiers stalking the aeries.

Defeat occurred in bottlenecks, usually disorderly lahgs bunching as they attempted to scale the massif, easily picked off by lurking assassins. Rowan repeatedly warned his kommandants to avoid exposure, but it was as if they couldn't help themselves. He could hardly blame them. There was just no way to weaken the defenders enough to get a foothold on the bulwark, and the only way to do that was to nestle the belly of the beast.

"The sun's up sersjant, time to assemble the legions."

Ojt. Bahuus nodded.

The hydrokraft monitors sparked to life, thousands of rainbow lights, each legionnaire a blue glow. It was a welcome sight, a clean slate free of the ubiquitous red and yellow pulsing lights, signifying immobile kuld-soldats subdued by phenohol or hydrokraft shutdown. Like the hierarchy of the Lifthrasir Corp itself, the monitor grouped each kuld-soldat by lahg and each lahg by battalion and legion. Rowan was able to evaluate the health of the Lifthrasir in a glance. It was basic economics, how best to command his

army without 'crapping out' on hydrokraft. It'd be much the same on Asgard but with higher stakes.

"Kdt. Guthrie, Sir!" His chief kommandants entered and saluted, ready for briefing.

They were seasoned veterans but lacked open field experience, adept at urban warfare but not the Great War's Napoleonic stalemate. Rowan knew nothing of city fighting. The Siegfried Line was a dearth of townscapes, leveled by artillery before a single Tommy or a Bosch could let loose a shot. His battlefields were the grinder of the Flemish trench-works, not the harrowing warrens of Ytter-Midgard. The Ny Aesiri soldier's world was that of dark alleyway labyrinths, nooks hiding sniper nests and booby traps, impending doom everywhere.

Rowan laid out the plan for his lieutenants. Some shook their heads, others looked confused, but most were unsure what to think. Rowan had quickly learned the undead were inflexible, new concepts nothing but desiccated mortar. The slow muck of pre-fabricated synapses, haphazardly held together by their cellemaskin trap-work, made split decisions tedious. Post-Skikk, the dysterfolk had trouble learning anything new.

"Remember, try to hold out as long as you can, at least until nightfall."

"This plan... It's impossible, Kdt. Guthrie. In the past we've barely sustained half a day's field operations as the Feltskanse assault corps," Kdt. Grov moaned, a lieutenant of the Lifthrasir's heavy-assault legion.

"Not much cover in the rubble of the trenches, nothing at the headwall step-"

"We'll lose half the Corp!" cried another.

Rowan ignored their protests.

"Fire sparingly. Remember, if you're hit, make sure they see you get hit. Make them think your belly's still sloshing with Muspel blue juice. They're going to need that hydrokraft. They'll be cannibals by dusk."

Some shook their heads, others expressed doubt.

#

The marine layer cleared with dawn, the mists drifting out over Stillehavet's western expanse. The countdown ended, strained minutes as all waited for the first report. Then, like a sprint-pistol, the banshee whistle of an inbound shell. It was Sigurd, always the first shot, always itchy for battle. The gurgle of lung-guns echoed over the battlefield like chain-reaction. Locomotive puffs vented from their chamber siphons. Purging hydrokraft from the kuld-soldat's reservoirs, the phenohol shots bled them just like the weapons would on Asgard.

"Incoming!"

The impact rattled the command sikring, kicking on the bunker's phenohol scrubbers. With his monocular, Rowan surveyed the crevices. Sigurd's Lif Corps scrambled, half-confused and half-drunk by the boon of easy potshots. Rowan's plan unfolded. He sent legionnaires scattering through the ditch-works near Feltskanse Head. The enemy unloaded a splatter of auto-cannons while lazy-eyed grenadiers' littered the lower debris fields. So many targets, they took no care to aim.

Rowan, like a magician, was succeeding in his illusion. The Lifthrasir battalions were in choreographed disarray. It was pure honey, baiting Sigurd's hunger for victory while draining him of energy reserve. Rowan could picture Sigurd, smugly

standing with his overbetjents, glancing at his stopwatch.

"Over there!" Ojt. Bahuus yelled.

Rowan looked through the scope. A lahg of twenty kuld-soldat spilled out of their sap. Running for it, they pushed into the lee of a shallow embankment. With only low overhangs of brittle basalt for protection, cover was spartan. Sigurd's lung-guns pummeled them, tracer fire ricocheting like Mandarin crackers. A few stood to shoot but were cut down by sniper fire. Rowan flipped on his noise-canceller and attenuated the phenohol to pierce the smog. The pinned soldiers glowed steady green on the monitor, still hydrokraft rich but losing ground.

"Keep it up you lot. Just a little longer," Rowan said. "Sersjant, we need for them to spread out."

"Lahg 73 -over- we need for you to disperse," Ojt. Bahuus radioed.

"Command, tell Kdt. Guthrie fire is too heavy. We're unable to disperse -over-," The field kommandant's voice swam in static.

"I don't care. They're going to have to make a go of it."

Ojt. Bahuus radioed the order. Rowan peered out and saw kuld-soldat inching up the rock step, drawing fire away from the crowded salient. Sigurd's Lif had too many gun emplacements, all lodged like tics. He ordered an auto-cannon nest to target the lower massif, unleashing a spectacularly but impotent barrage to distract, the assault nothing but stagecraft. Rowan's mangy attack was having the desired affect, draining Sigurd of his hydrokraft.

"Rear legion is at full strength. Any orders?"

"No, Bahuus. Leave 'em be."

The dichloric phenohol fueled endothermic catalysts, freezing and incapacitating the undead soldier. The artillery shells and lung-gun ammunition, unlike their incendiary cousins, exploded with a gaseous concussion, detonating the coagulated reactant. Each pop-burst released a gas that engulfed the orifices, temporarily mutilating the svartblod chemistry from the inside out. The victims folded limbs, twisted backs and contorted legs mutated into caricatures of inner monstrosity.

Rowan scanned the battlefield for his casualties. Through the murk, one lahg caught his attention. Fending off the onslaught from an overhang, a kuld-soldat covered his mates while the others booby-trapped a fallen menig's purge siphon, a simple trick that forced phenohol back into the chest reservoir.

Rowan had ordered it. The fluid posed no harm, but uncoupling the gun siphon popped the valve like a champagne cork, poisoning the hydrokraft with phenohol. Lif caught slurping off Rowan's menigs would be brought to their knees instantly.

Hours wore on, the island's polluted sunset sacrificed for the twilight of magenta tracer fire. The battle was at stalemate, both armies' energy reserves critical. Rowan's monitor glowed like a rainbow, most lahgs drained red, others half blinking yellow, and a few still stubbornly green. The skirmish had turned into a grudge match, a sloppy night-fight on the dune escarpment.

"Get me Kdt. Grov on the wireless."

"Right at once." Ojt. Bahuus said, radioing.

Rowan's vocal synthesizer chirped to life. "Oberst, what's your status? -over."

"Continuing mortar bombardment, forward lines decimated, back ranks holding. Our hydrokraft monitor has lost link. We're having a hard time with our damage assessment and we've got a few draugars on our hands."

"Draugars? How many?"

Rowan feared draugars, monster kuld-soldat rabid with madness.

"Enough." Grov's guttural voice was the sound of a blown speakerphone.

Rumor had it, his Ytter-Midgard death was infamous, a viscous neck wound so brutal it'd nearly severed his head. Grov managed to crawl to safety before he bled to death. He was a tough bastard and one of Rowan's stalwart Suncasapa.

"I'll bring my portable unit forward -over," Rowan said.

"Night sensors are picking up movement near the chimneys. They're coming out -over."

"Good. I'll be there shortly -over and out."

Sigurd was taking the bait, his quick victory no longer a forgone conclusion. The fire-fall he'd unleashed was failing, and now he was bleeding. By sacrificing his forward battalions, Rowan had kept his back ranks primed and ready. It was a gambit he hoped would pay off.

Dance of defeat, conceit fails to compete; the bite of this feat now blights retreat. Sigurd's victory contradictory, adaptability in hostility gives way to possibility, sung Engel.

She disassembled the portable monitor and followed Rowan into the entrenchment. Always with him, Engel was a loyal war dog who never left his

side. Sniffing the air, her compound lens panned the gloom like a Doberman ready to pounce.

They tramped through the labyrinth of dusty trenches' towards Kdt. Grov's sikring. The battle had lulled. Almost too quiet, Rowan didn't like it. The Ny Æsiri kuld-soldat were a far cry from the bored Tommies he once knew, no pissing off or card playing, no cigarettes or lewd chitchat about the talents of the local harlots. Instead, the kuld-soldat were cat-like, shifting on their haunches as they readied themselves for the enemy. A few saluted but most crouched near the fire line, prone on the parapets, whispering and scanning the wastes for the enemy.

Fallen kuld-soldat littered the path like rubbish, making it an obstacle course of a slog. He looked down. There was sentience behind their frozen eyes. Skirmish rules mandated they stay put. After scrimmage cessation, Bifrost technicians roamed the battleground and delivered the anticoagulant. Within minutes the menigs were right as rain and ready for more.

As they approached Grov's sikring, something buzzed by overhead. It was a rogue shell, sailing in from the frontline. They dove to the ground, waiting for the concussion. It was a close, the impact just a few hundred meters between Rowan and Kdt. Grov's outpost. The blast funneled through the salient complex like a shotgun barrel, freezing the ranks close in. Rowan clenched his jaw as he'd been trained. The vacuum of dirt and debris ripped the air from his lungs. He flexed his throat and tried to keep his innards from welling into the esophagus, but it was not easy. He looked at Bahuus, eye's bulged and mouth cocked open like a dying fish.

"Almost too close!" Bahuus yelled.

Rowan nodded.

The phenohol shell was absorbed and dispersed by the trenchworks ahead. Just a tinge of frost coated his shielding. They were spared, but the lahgs defending Kdt. Grov's position weren't so lucky. Engel gathered the monitor's satchel and pulled Rowan to his feet. She danced ahead to scope the path.

Clear, no fear, the bombs not near. Vapor's tapered, forward toward the trench's ford.

"Aye, Engel."

Grov's trapezoidal sikring emerged from the gloom. The blast shutters were closed. Nothing stirred except air scrubbers rumbling somewhere deep inside. The forward lines had taken a toll. The sandblasted walls and pyramidal radomes were fractured, scarred by chips and dings. Rubble was everywhere. Rowan led them through the aftermath. Disabled menigs struggled against the phenohol, steam rising from their bodies as the catalyst took hold. They desperately grabbed at Rowan's legs, but he couldn't help them. It was skirmish rules.

Maybe it was reflex, like the twitches of a beheaded chicken or the curling of a severed tentacle. The kuld-soldat weren't dying, their muscles didn't know the difference at least, but they looked God-awful haunted.

"Kdt. Guthrie is outside. Requesting entry - over" Bahuus radioed.

The sikring door opened with a gust of pressurized air. Inside was a bustle of activity. There was a disturbance upstairs like the sounds of a rabid animal.

"What is that?"

"It's the draugar, Kdt. Guthrie. Kdt. Grov is up on the observation level. But be warned, this one's a bit of a troll," a menig said, saluting.

They climbed the sikring's narrow staircase. The snarls grew louder. It was a sersjant turned draugar, held to the ground by a gang of struggling menigs. Rowan had dealt with draugars before but this one was berserk. It was a psychosis brought on by airburst and concussion. Skjærsild knew it to be a nasty side effect of Skikk's transmogrification, like an undercooked brain gone fetid.

"Shoddy rotten work," Kdt. Grov said.

He was impressive, his copious tattoos fully aglow despite the dead flesh. The Ny Æsiri were short in stature but Grov towered over them. His eyes were hard and his neck was knotted with synthetic scarring.

"Draugars, how many?" Rowan asked.

"Five or ten so far. This last batch was fresh from Ny Midgard's birthing tanks -The whole lahg was sour, rotten the day they stepped off the diomedea. It's like they'd been sabotaged. A few, sure, but this many?"

The menigs struggled to hold the draugar as they heated a cauterizing tool. Like a kuld-soldat in zero atmospheres, one could tell a draugar by the black swelling of the skin. As their brains unraveled, insanity crept in, rejecting the undead vessel wholly. They fought with an unquenchable rage, wanting to kill whatever god was responsible for their abominable existence. The Ny Æsiri holy men called it Grettir's Curse, a hero's doom. But Rowan had a differing opinion.

"Sabotage, a Vanir infiltration of the Skjærsild. Bloody cunning," Rowan said.

"Nifheim, if that's the case. An ominous possibility," Grov replied.

Mindless babble spewed from the monster's lips. The draugar was naked, the shielding torn away from the struggle, flesh distended with water. Svartblod splattered the walls and nearby consoles. With a quick flip, they manhandled him into position and sliced his neck with the white-hot cutting tool. The head wobbled with superhuman spasms, pounding the ground underneath until at last, it broke free of its fleshy anchor and rolled onto the grating.

"Bury it," Grov ordered. "I don't want to look at it."

"-What's she doing?" someone said.

Engel had swiped the draugar's head and was busy dissecting it like a lab frog. Collapsible implements unfolded from her wrists, slicing off sheets of the black swollen flesh for analysis. She took pictures, the flash illuminating the diced brain. After a few minutes of cutting and filleting, the soupy skull collapsed into a pile of mush.

"She has a mobile lab onboard, the wireless links the data to Skjærsild," Rowan explained.

"What in Nifheim is she looking for?"

Berserker's guise in soldier lies; enemy's hand leaves their army's brand, Engel sang.

"What'd she say?" Grov said, bewildered.

"Not sure, espionage forensics, looking for signs of Vanir saboteurs, I think."

"Menig, get that slop out of here when she's done picking through it," Grov ordered a legionnaire.

"Hope this gets sorted out before the crossing," Rowan said.

"And if it doesn't?"

Rowan shrugged.

Kdt. Grov brought up the forward monitors. Things were quieter, just a few sporadic shots to keep the enemy frosty. They looked through the scanners and saw Lif kuld-soldat creeping around the escarpment, setting up forward positions and scouting Rowan's fallen menigs. Their movements were sluggish and few, a good sign. They were thirsty for energy and ready to bite the lure.

"We need to sneak forward, as many kuld-soldat as possible. Quickly!" Rowan said.

"There's an unused mine near the sikring. We can use it to get a small shock force up to attacking positions. Moving underground, it'll be more difficult to detect us."

"Aye. We'll let go the reserves on Feltskanse Head. It should keep Sigurd pinned down long enough to make a beachhead at the lower vestibules. There's a rock chimney right above it, full of snipers and booby traps. It's quite a pinch."

They crawled head to toe through the dark twists of a small utility mine, choked with power cables. Sometimes on hands and knees, Rowan's contingent pawed the ground like moles as they pulled themselves through the tight space. Dust was everywhere and every wiggle broke loose a minor cave-in. Luckily dysterfolk weren't claustrophobic, lacking the proclivity for the panic seizing condition. By design the circuitry of fear had rotted away completely, never to be repaired.

"Kdt. Grov, what's at the end?"

"A junction sump just below a scrubber vent, unused. We can widen it a bit and climb up through

it." Rowan could barely hear Grov's junked voice. The confined space jumbled sound into dense impenetrable noise.

Engel led the way. Her body writhed with a mechanical centipede movement, hyper-articulate arms and legs undulating. She took to the small passage like she'd been built for it, headlamps bobbing as she scouted the path ahead. Engel was always surprising him. Vidar must've spent long nights programming her, concocting a chemical soup of disparate talent the likes the world had never known.

They reached a chamber just below the surface, barely big enough for the lahg. Rowan ordered them quiet as he tried to filter out the distant artillery thuds and lung-gun chatter. Sigurd's Lif had to be close, coming to thief energy from the fallen kuld-soldat above. Engel looked up and waited for the cue, head cocked to listen to the earth's subsonic pulses.

Lif creeping for the reaping, edgy for energy to fill for the kill.

"Spiders coming out for the flies," Bahuus said, winking.

Rowan nodded.

"Sigurd's taking the bait."

Rainwater dribbled down the ladder chute, a tropical squall letting loose on the Bifrost atoll. Rowan listened. Minutes, maybe hours passed as they waited. The rear scanners detected nothing. Engel setup a portable monitor, the wireless connection giving him a picture of the upper escarpment.

"There, do you see them?" Rowan pointed at the screen.

Bahuus crouched closer for a look.

The Lif brought out blue canisters to hold the salvaged condensate. Rowan ordered his army to let them fill their tanks with the tainted hydrokraft, unmolested. The enemy swarmed the pilfered loot, fighting over the kuld-soldats' siphons like a frenzied wake of buzzards. It didn't take much time. The twitches and lameness came on quick. A few made it back to Feltskanse but most collapsed where they stood. Latecomers stood dumbfounded and exposed. Sigurd had taken the poison, his men drawn out from the redoubt. No longer ambulatory, their innards quickly seized as the phenohol permeated the spongy cadaverous tissue.

"Using your own legion as bait... If you don't mind my saying herr kommandant, you're thinking like the Vanir," Grov remarked.

"Aye. Someone has to." Rowan looked over at Bahuus. "How many lahgs?"

"About twenty, spaced along the frontline, lying in ditches, sumps, that sort of thing."

"Get them ready on my mark."

Rowan gave him the sign. Quickly, the lahgs cleared the wet sand from the vent and crawled to the surface. Slithering through one by one, they emerged. It looked like the aftermath of a phosgene attack. Soldiers writhed all along the battlefield and moaned with the sound of ruptured steam boilers. Sigurd let loose an anemic barrage, the phenohol quickly dissipating with the rain. Rowan rushed the lower chimney and picked off the dazed enemy as he ran.

"Up there!"

They clambered into the lower chimney. The rocky hollow instantly filled with grenades bouncing their way downward like pennies in a well. Rowan hurried his men into the complex. The yellow haze

welled up along the upper escarpment. Menigs stood frozen mid-stride, tin soldiers falling over each other. Rowan had to get them inside before the element of surprise was spent. Ojt. Bahuus swam through the struggling soldiers, pulling the ambulatory to safety as Engel pitched kuld-soldat forward like rag dolls.

"How many?"

"Two -maybe three lahgs, a few stragglers," Kdt. Grov said.

"That's enough," Rowan said.

They'd arrived in one of the darkened staging vestibules below the command bunker. Sigurd had shutdown power to minimize energy, leaving the chamber a black jumble of spent cartridges and purged canisters. The area was empty. Rowan ordered his men to sling their lung-guns, fighting with phenohol in a confined space was too risky. The gas had nowhere to go. They'd end up snuffing themselves along with the enemy.

Rowan took his lahg and crept up the central stairwells. There was a raucous din of hollers and squishy artillery thuds. Engel crept forward. Her insectoid suite of sensors bristled. She motioned Rowan to keep back, probing an intersection near the logistics hub.

"What's she up to?" Bahuus whispered.

Rowan shrugged.

It was an ambush. A swarm of Lif menigs leapt from small caches in the ceiling and floors, trying to tackle Engel. Every part of her became its own creature, detached and disassociated from a central mind. Arms fought separately as legs knocked the feet out from the attackers, while her head effortlessly floated above the fray. It was a choreographed ballet of violence and Rowan was an

obsessed voyeur. A few lightening snaps of her wrist and the assailants fell. She dropped a handful of gooey chest plugs to the grate as the kuld-soldat twitched and convulsed in fizzled pools of their own spilt condensate. It was over. She turned and looked at Rowan, evoking a motherly calm.

"What's wrong, Kommandant?"

"I remember her face now," Rowan whispered.

"Whose face?"

Rowan didn't answer but rubbed his eyes. They were wet with fluid. It was Ragna, Engel manipulating his emotions. He remembered everything about her now, her exotic beauty, the girlish laugh, and her haunted brown eyes. This event - like déjà vu- provided stimuli, a conduit to memories he thought lost. As long as Engel was near, Ragna was too. They were jumbled together by a drunken dream-logic. She walked over to him and stood close, her mesmerizing compound eye acting like a crystal ball, lulling him. He closed his eyes.

"Ragna..."

She's with me, this coil's sweet oil, blood's flood switched with unseen machine pitch. You'll return and burn to spurn passion ashen... humanity's vanity waits the date. For her, I will assure you endure, Engel sang.

"Herr Kommandant?" Grov said. No answer. He turned to Bahuus. "Does he do this often?"

"Occasionally. It's different with him than it is with us."

"Different?"

"It's Skjærsild's engramming. Both him and the savateuse have it. Rumor is they've done something special with his filtering to help marshal us on

Asgard. She's part of it," Ojt. Bahuus said. Rowan heard them but was unable to speak, momentarily paralyzed.

"Nifheim if he bogs down like this in real battle." Grov stood in front of him and snapped his fingers. "Kdt. Guthrie! Trolls got a hold of you? You there?"

"I'm here," Rowan said finally. He stumbled and looked at Engel, standing still like a watchdog laying in wait. "I lost myself for a moment."

"She whistled something," Grov said.

"It's her unspoken language."

"And what did she say to put you in such a trance?"

Rowan shook his head. "Nothing I can put into words."

"I see." Kdt. Grov looked frustrated. "It seems someone's playing you the puppet."

"Oberst, what're you trying to say?" Rowan said.

"Nothing. The dead man's senses are a blunt instrument. It's just..."

"-Speak up-"

"She'd a hold of you for whatever reason. Pardon me, but with the draugars and all, this assault's got me weary, leading me to question a few things as of late."

"It's nothing to concern yourself with, Kdt. Grov. She's tenfold the asset she is the liability and completely trustworthy." Rowan pulled the phenohol cartridge from his lung-gun and slung it. He was tired of discussing it. "No weapons, hand to hand only. Let's get on with it."

"If you say so, sir." Kdt. Grov eyed Engel with a suspicious eye.

They approached the command center's main door. It hung open lazily, half concealing a starscape

of twinkling electrical lights beyond. Rowan ordered Grov and Bahuus to keep the menigs back. He dilated his eyes and walked into the darkness.

"Kdt. Guthrie!"

It was Sigurd, slouching in a high backed chair, facing a monitor. His contingent stood by and said nothing, busily packing up their command center into small crates. They were defeated. Rowan pulled a dusty sealskin glove from his shielding and tossed it to the floor.

"What's that kommandant?" Sigurd said, swiveling his chair around.

"The Stridshanske's been thrown. I invoke the Einherjar, Sigurd," Rowan said. "Hand me the falskniv, Ojt. Bahuus."

The overbetjent handed him the weapon. Long and heavy, it was made for kuld-soldat hand-to-hand sparring. It wasn't so much a knife as it was a delivery system. The blade was pocked with small holes ready to flood with liquid phenohol. Just a squeeze and the blade seethed. A stiff jab through the shielding and into the kuld-soldat's body was all it took.

"I'm sorry, Herr Guthrie. I just had my senior kommandant broadcast our formal letter of subjugation. Didn't you receive it?" Sigurd said.

Ojt. Bahuus checked his radio and nodded. The communiqué probably sent not but a minute ago.

"What about melee? It's in the skirmish rules! You have to honor it," Rowan said. "It's either this or total defeat. You've got nothing to lose."

"And nothing to gain really. You said it yourself. These skirmishes are zero-sum contests. Not really sure it'd prove anything, do you?" Sigurd said.

He casually got up, threw a radio unit into a satchel like he was leaving a briefing. Rowan wanted to go after him. He was insufferable and a Blighty wound might've made for good medicine.

"Prove anything? No one's won the Feltskanse siege the whole bloody time we've been at Bifrost, and here we stand, right as rain! I think we owe it to the Lif and Lifthrasir Corps. It's only right!" Rowan was incredulous. Sigurd was playing the sore loser.

"Only right? You're joking, Herr Guthrie. You're clever. I'll give you that, but whatever you were trying to prove with this subterfuge... I don't know -Were you playing the Vanir foil? Trying to prove a point?" Sigurd said.

"-Maybe."

"The Vanir don't fight this way anyhow. They're more diabolical -posioners and assassins. They never leave their dead for the pilfering, not even as a trap." Sigurd reached down to grab the glove.

"Then why'd you loot my soldiers?"

"We were low on Muspel. It was the only way to get more-"

"-But you just said the Vanir would never leave their dead for the pickings."

"I wasn't fighting the Vanir. I was fighting you, Kdt. Guthrie."

"Then what was the whole point of Bifrost?"

"How should I phrase it..." Sigurd said, pacing. "It's through weakness that we're able to find our strength, whatever that strength might be."

Rowan shrugged.

"Dysterfolk are close to the perfect fighting machine, but we do have weaknesses."

"How's that?"

"The undead mind is clumsy. I don't need to tell you that, Kdt. Guthrie. I've fought, you've fought, we can fire lung-guns, crawl through muck, manage a battlefield, etcetera... We're good at fighting our enemies, you especially when it comes to this trench warfare, but what we really have to fight..." he said, pointing to his temple. "...is the decay upstairs. Learning the limitations of our clouded brains. As dysterfolk, the stains of our living minds are almost impossible to erase."

"I don't get you Sigurd."

"In time you will," Sigurd handed him back his glove as he walked to the door. "I commend you on your victory, Kdt. Guthrie, nicely fought and very clever. Congratulations. You showed uncanny..." he paused, searching for the right word, "...adaptability."

"Sigurd!"

He stopped at the doorway and turned around.

"Next time," Rowan said, holding the glove up in his fist. "Stridshanske, on your honor."

Sigurd tipped his helmet and nodded, then walked out the door.

#

The Valkyries hung from the ceiling like slaughterhouse beef, dangling from a thin rail that wound its way through the staging area. He walked up to an egg-shaped capsule and traced the fiery hammer in diamond blue. Slushy sweat condensed over the black surface, obscuring the paired kuld-soldat inside. He could see their faces quiet with sleep. It was only a few hours now before the Longship Masters would load the Valkyries into the payload. There were hundreds, probably thousands, his entire Lifthrasir Corp, bundled into deliverable parcels ready to be sent

express to Asgard's frozen rust. He walked through the rows and inspected them.

There were voices breaking the tomb-like quiet. Rowan stepped out from behind a pod and saw Skjærsild technicians wrapped in the likes of deep-sea diving suits, scrubber bulbs bulging from their jowls, eyes peering out from thick goggles. Einar and Sigurd were loitering as well, quietly issuing instructions as the men went about their business. Clear bags of liquid lay on a cart, tubes connected to the interface panel of a Valkyrie. They patched a fluid dose to the kuld-soldat in situ, an ad-hoc filtering regiment for cellemaskin tuning. It seemed last minute.

"Sigurd, Einar, what's going on here? These are my kuld-soldat," Rowan said, suspicious.

"Some last minute patching, Kdt. Guthrie," Einar said.

"Standard procedure. The shipment just arrived via diomedea last night, straight from Midgard," Sigurd said.

Rowan looked at the cart. He couldn't read Ny Æsiri well enough for the fine print, but the markings on the bag looked strange, like warnings symbols. The technicians were handling the green gel bags like nitro-glycerin. There was something special about the concoction, something dangerous.

"We can thank your Engelfrigg for this little batch," Einar said. "Without her, we wouldn't have been able to do this."

"-Do what?"

Einar turned to Sigurd but said nothing.

"Inoculate against whatever makes us prone to draugarism," Sigurd said. "Engel uploaded her Feltskanse findings back to Ny Midgard. Our scientists analyzed the draugar brain and came up

with a fix. It's not one hundred percent, but if the Vanir ever figure out how to trigger the syndrome, it could wipe out the 3rd Wave. Everybody's getting a dose, you and me included."

"The 2nd Wave's detected espionage by the Asgard Vanir. It's just something like this that their spies could exploit to our end, reducing everyone to draugars," Einar said, his covered chin moving around like an insect maw.

"Why the suits?" Rowan said, gesticulating at the technicians. "It's just svartblod filtering. They're all done up like its mustard gas."

"The svartblod emulsions are extremely volatile, a highly unstable chemical energy. The cellemaskin wasn't optimized molecularly to make them safe. There wasn't enough time," Einar tried to explain. He poked at the bags. The technicians jerked away, afraid. "It could be poison or it could be milk and honey? No one knows. It wasn't exposure tested."

Sigurd led Rowan away. Einar went back to supervising the technicians. He didn't understand why such a high-level intelligence officer needed to be involved with routine maintenance. Maybe they'd finally listened to him, one Vanir assassin too many. It was a start but probably too late. How many Kdt. Roligs had infiltrated the army, waiting for the 3rd Wave to reach Asgard so they could spring their trap? Rowan couldn't do much about it now. If the wolves had made their way into the herd, it'd be near impossible to flush them out.

"You can never be too precautions when it comes to those troll bastards. I'm mindful despite your opinion to the contrary," Sigurd said.

"Trolls now? What happened to squashable insects, eh?"

"I make light from time to time, but I've been fighting Ytter-Midgard's for almost a decade, since I was a menig. I'm fully aware of their capabilities and I know how to exploit them."

"I've been told how you exploit them, for good and bad," Rowan said.

"Pardon?"

"I think you know."

"She's been talking to you hasn't she, Ivar and her father, blaming me and all that? Ragna was one for grudges. Always had a mouth on her."

"This isn't about Ragna, Sigurd."

"I think it is. I think you both found something in each other, all those hours, nursing you like a mother. Be weary Rowan, she's not the kind of girl that sits still for anyone very long, especially for a dead man-".

"-You've no right to question her honor," Rowan said.

"Nifheim, I do! You seriously think, in that cold head of yours, there's a possibility you can revive the old primeval flame? Look at you. You're dead -undead at that- you were her pet and that's all you'd ever be. Her lover? Loki's really put a seed in your head," Sigurd laughed. "She'll return to Midgard and forget all about you. You were nothing but a paycheck."

"There's always hope, even for the undead."

"There's only Valhalla for us, Herr Guthrie. See all these dysterfolk waiting for their longships? -They're past all that. They're ready for the Rainbow Bridge and the Valgirnd Gate. Why aren't you? You died in battle just like they did. They know what dark designs evil has for our world,

just like you. I promised my people victory, and I'll give it to them. Victory at Ragnarok is the only path, turn back Fimbulwinter and insure Baldr's reign over Asgard with Lif and the Lifthrasir leading the way. Everything else is..." Sigurd said.

"-Is what Sigurd?-"

"-Trivial."

"What about people, are they trivial? People are all we have, those we've befriended, loved, for better or worse-"

"-For worse. How is it that one thousand years of ice hasn't frozen that out of you yet? I've been dead for a blink, but I've moved on past all that. Whether you admit it or not, you're just like me just, lagging a bit in attitude maybe... You'll come around, there's a berserker in you yet," Sigurd said.

"Why do you keep on with that berserker business? Sigurd, I'm nothing like you," Rowan said.

"Prove it."

"What do you mean?"

"All talk, quotes from dead men who never walked a step in your shoes, probably too thick to imagine such glory themselves. Why do you keep holding on? You're here with me now, Rowan. We're at the edge of the world, dangling from the same cliff. The difference is that I've let go. You just have to make that final step. Let yourself sink. Reign in the abyss where no living man dare tread. Glory's there if you want it," Sigurd said.

"Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven, as it were," Rowan said.

"There you go again. As I always say, Hell is other people," Sigurd said.

"Jean-Paul Sartre-" Rowan said, surprised.

Sigurd laughed. "I'm no barbarian, Herr Guthrie. You're not the only warrior poet here. I too have a sense of history. The difference is whether you want a hand in writing it."

"-I..."

"-Leave the man behind. Life is a prison full of irrational biology and hormones, driving us down predictable pathetic paths of lust and foolishness that keep us from our true soul."

"But the heart is the soul."

"Remember at the ceremony in Ny Midgard? Viracocha's holy men, self-flagellating, swearing oaths of celibacy, hunger stints, feats of suffocation... I know why they do it, and it's nothing to do with self-sacrifice. It's everything to do with disgust."

"Disgust? You hated life didn't you? You wanted all this," Rowan said, touching his chest and shoulders. "Someone must have wronged you horrible for you to end up in such a state-"

"-No one wronged me," Sigurd sneered.

Rowan knew it was a lie but held his tongue. "There's been dark times, misery so low I never saw daylight, but there was always hope."

"Rubbish! I know your history, Lt. Rowan Aidan Guthrie, and I've just one question for you. Why'd you go over-the-top all those years ago? Insanity? There you were with an army almost three times the size of yours and no hope of winning. Yet you stumbled on a victory, the likes of which haven't been recorded since Thermopylae or Rorke's Drift. But why?" Sigurd exclaimed with a smirk so broad Rowan could see the devil himself.

"I was ordered-"

"-I think you wanted to throw yourself away that December morning. It was either that or a pistol bullet to the brain case. If you look inside yourself, you'll find the warm-flesh scar left behind, telling you the same exact thing."

Rowan stood back and said nothing. He closed his eyes and tried to tune out Sigurd's thick baritone but only succeeded in morphing his words into the chant of some primeval demon. His periphery warped into a spiral tunnel, a vertigo world with Sigurd floating still at its nexus. A crack exploded through his body, rattling his cold flesh like the Hammer of Thor himself.

"He's fallen," Sigurd roared. "Get a technician. He's slipped into coma."

There was the sound of garbled distant voices.

"We'll revive him. It's good enough time as any to administer the cellemaskin skydom." The voice was Einar's. Rowan couldn't open his eyes. The words died into incoherent mush as his mind slipped away.

#

Lt. Guthrie waded through stagnant eddies of the fetid river. Bodies, like flood logs drifted through the flotsam, bloated gray, mirroring the fog drenched murk looming low over the estuary. He'd been walking for most of the night, avoiding patrols, British and Hun alike. Now his feet were numb, trench foot seeping in through the whale grease. He checked his timepiece, six o'clock, just a quarter hour to make the rendezvous.

This was No Man's Land, the Sheldt cutting through it like the River Styx. Nothing lived. The withered veins of dead trees stretched into the morning's ugliness, their leaves blown clean from unnatural heat and foul fumes. Yellow flames

flickered along the riverbank, errant shells finding tinder in the splintered remains of useless villages. He opened the oilskin bag and looked inside. The codebook's pages were browned with water damage, the ink slightly run but still legible.

"You'll get me what I need," he muttered, cold saliva dripping from the corner of his mouth. "Matters not, I'm a bloody dead man."

He knelt along the muddy shore and slurped a handful of brackish water. His throat was parched, cholera be damned. Catching the glint in the reflection, he saw the signal, a naval shutter lamp blinking in code. Quickly, he shed his uniform. Bundling his boots and clothes with a belt strap, he managed to hide them somewhere dry, a discarded rations box wedged under an exposed root. He approached the river and waded in. The cold sent a shock through his extremities. The December air bit, licking his flesh cool as he eased into the swift waters.

The bag's tether tugged at his ankle as he swam, pulling his legs down river like a flag in the wind. He struggled to find a pace. The current rip filled his mouth with foul water as he gulped for breath. The signal continued giving him bearing. Rowan neared the far shore, pulling at dead branches as he weaved his way through felled logs littered with browning leaves. He heaved himself onto the mud bank and lay still, half exhausted and afraid.

"Herr Guthrie?" It was a thick German accent.

Rowan stood to his feet, naked except his dripping trouser briefs. A Hun patrol stepped out from a shattered grove, weapons slung. A soldier handed Rowan a trench coat, damp but adequate to

escape the soggy breeze. Another lit him a coffin nail. He untied the dry bag and opened it, grabbing the codebook. He wanted this to be over quick and be on his way. An officer walked out ahead of his men, tall with sharp features, faintly Slavic. He introduced himself as Commandant Asperheim, the officer Rowan had covertly communicated with via wireless. It'd taken months to set this up and now it was time.

"Here you are commandant. Are we finished?"

"I suppose we are. Just one thing--"

"What?"

"I'm curious lieutenant, why?" the commandant said, thumbing through the tattered codebook.

"My reasons are my own," Rowan muttered, the cigarette quivering in his lips.

"Betray your country? The money's been transferred to Zurich, but if you don't mind me saying, the payment's measly compensation. It's a firing squad if your treason's discovered. So much risk," the commandant said, handing the codebook to his corporal. He lit a cigarette. "... and so brazen. You must be a bitter man."

"Let's just say I want to help insure this war's lost. I'm tired. It's taken everything and now I'm going to take something from it."

"It's personal then--"

"-Everything's personal, commandant. Why do you care?"

"I've never met a traitor before. I want to know how it feels."

Rowan laughed. "It feels like..." he paused, thinking. "-Nothing at all. Like I'm no longer alive. I still breath, walk, talk, but I died sometime ago."

"A few ingots of gold's not going to bring you out of that despair, I'm afraid. Good luck with everything, Herr Guthrie. You're going to need it. If you'll pardon us, there's a war on." He said, nodding over his shoulder. "We must be going."

"Aye."

Rowan handed the Germans back the trench coat and quickly made for the water. The river's flow was boiling with filth, dirt-foam coalesced into small eddies near the bank. He dove in, swimming through the thick river full of junk. Something hit him, something big. He gasped for air, pushing off the weight of a dead horse, bloated and drifting downstream. Its leg had been snapped. A hammer marked the skull where mercy had been delivered. He swam on.

There was someone mucking around the tree where he'd left his clothes, a young Tommy on patrol. Barefooted, Rowan inched through the mud and grass. The boy soldier hadn't noticed him, too busy rummaging through the rations box where he'd left his clothes.

"Lt. R.A.Guthrie... Bloody hell!" the boy said, reading the uniform tags.

He turned to have a look about but instead found Rowan's mud-dripping face staring back at him. Before he could speak, Rowan had unhooked the bayonet from the man's Enfield and placed his hand firmly over the lad's screaming mouth. A quick stab through the ribcage and it was all over. Blood gurgled through his fingers as he let the body drop. The dead weight felt heavy and wet as he dragged it into the river. It didn't take long for the soldier's remains to meld into the river's undifferentiated detritus.

The days had flowed into a week of gloom. His belly felt rotten, bile belches and coughs interrupted by diarrhea as he staggered, starving. He'd chucked his rifle for his Webley, walking No Man's Land's shadow-world like a wraith. There was a village ahead, timbers burnt and charred like creosote toothpicks spat into sludge. Crescent shards of a bone china and the odd leather shoe hinted at something more than death.

"Halt!" A voice boomed. "Drop the weapon, hands above your head. Step back and get on your knees."

The voice was cockney, a Tommy. Rowan did as ordered, hands shaking as he raised them. A small squad had been laying in wait. It was a British patrol, making the round near the wire. Drips of blood poured from his cheek, dripping into an opaque puddle. A sniper bullet had grazed his neck. He hadn't noticed.

"State your name and rank."

"Lt. Rowan Guthrie of the 242nd."

"-Is it him? The deserter?" said another.

"-Aye," another said, walking up. "Guthrie alright... It's written on his uniform. What a bloody mess."

Rowan kept his head low. He stunk with a barnyard reek of betrayal.

"Lt. Rowan Guthrie." It was an officer, a lieutenant captain like himself.

"Special services?" Rowan mumbled.

"Aye, counter-espionage, a real Black Hand Gang I've got here, the mates and I. We've been looking for you for a few days now, out here in the slog. Lt. Captain Nigel Hill's the name." He was thin and tall, hollow cheeks with a sharp 'V' shaped head that held his Brodie square on his crown.

"Does the name Commandant Asperheim ring a bell?"

Rowan looked up at the lieutenant, eyes blank.

"He was captured just last night. He had a codebook with your name all over it. It looks as if the Hun's have been using it to track British troop movements along the Scheldt. Those Bosch bastards knew right when we'd pulled out of Audenarde, moved in burnt the place to the ground," Lt. Hill said, lighting a Pall Mall.

Rowan looked on, eyes distant and frozen.

"Got anything to say in your defense? Might as well talk, didn't take long for your Hun friend to capitulate," Lt. Hill said.

"Audenarde, leveled?" Rowan whispered.

"Aye, scorched. I'm sure the magistrate overseeing your regimental court martial will sort out your treasonous exploits. We're just here to arrest you. Your betrayal's been strangely serendipitous," Hill said wryly.

Rowan said nothing, confused.

"You've unknowingly done a bit of double agent work for your beloved Britain. Commandant Asperheim was a prolific spy recruiter, not easily captured. The promise of your codes had brought him out of the shadows and onto the battlefield," Hill continued. Rowan sat back on his haunches and lit his last cigarette.

"Didn't realize," Rowan muttered, gesticulating like a drunken derelict.

"That's right. It seems Asperheim has been conscripting ner'-do-wells from our back ranks for some time. We've got quite a list. Looks like a glut of the bastards did their worst in Lt. Richard's regiment," Lt. Hill said.

"Richards? The crazy sod was already on his last legs. Pulled his eyes out. They saw him do it. Getting' at 'em before the gas could do its worst." Rowan drifted off, staring idly at a peppered roof of a shelled rail station nearby.

"Get 'em up chaps. This bastard's all wax no wick."

It'd been days since he'd eaten. His gut churned as the soldiers lifted him up onto wobbly knees. He wanted to vomit but his stomach offered nothing. They knocked his feet apart and lifted his hands behind his head. Their faces riled with grimaces of disgust as they patted him down for weapons. He stunk, and the sick he'd left behind had congealed like glue onto his wool uniform. Something fell out and dangled against his lapel.

"A ring for a girl?" Lt. Hill lifted it up and stared at the diamond. Rowan could smell the humid brew of bully beef and tobacco on his breath. "Shame that, putting her through such disgrace."

"Better this..." Rowan mumbled. They manhandled him as they restrained his hands and shackled his ankles for the march back. He tottered, dry heaves forcing saliva and blood to his lips.

"Mad dog, by George! Look at yah! Pathetic bastard yah are!" Hill exclaimed.

"Now..." he coughed.

"Now what?"

"Now she can watch me die."

[TD] CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Darkness mixed with altered chemical-thought, the sleep cycle spanning months of interplanetary travel. Like a dream, his eyes opened, spartan segues bridging gaps between soveaske reservoir change-outs. It was an engineering glitch the Longship Masters hadn't corrected, but a glitch with a life its own. The hiccups awoke Rowan to sterile silence, interrupted by pneumatic hisses of the ship's filtering pumps. Each stirring may've lasted minutes, but time had derailed from its usual triggers. There was no way for Rowan to measure it. And just when thoughts emerged from nonsense, a dose of fresh soveaske spilled into his brain, shutting down his embryonic consciousness, returning him to hibernation.

There wasn't much to experience inside the Valkyries. A few hours awake and Rowan might've begged to be knocked out again. Engel was his pod-mate. Her oblong eye loomed large, its ocular facets collecting and scattering starlight like a crystal. He strained to focus his washed-out eyes. The payload specialist had strapped him into his seat in such a way that eclipsed his gaze of the view-port. The heavenly vistas of divinity lay tantalizingly close but ultimately out-of-reach.

The fleet of longships traveled silent seas onward to the rust deserts of Asgard, leaving Earth's frozen shores behind. The Longship Masters had launched a hundred ships. Each carried several battalions of kuld-soldat, riding clustered in their Valkyrie pods like egg skeins attached to the underbelly of some colossal fish. Again, his

eyes opened. Something was different. The light had changed. A jaundiced glow replaced slivers of shadow. Fingers and toes twitched, thoughts coalesced around the sludge of synaptic circuitry. They were close.

There was a clunk and then a hiss. He looked at Engel. She was still, but something in her stirred. Rowan felt sentience behind the alien maw and insect stare. A switch had been thrown inside the Valkyrie's timing circuitry. The hibernation cycle was ending.

"Engel!" he croaked.

Nothing.

"The Valkyries are disengaging. It's the descent!"

Yellow faded to red. They'd entered Asgard's upper stratum. A spurt of the steering rockets corrected the Valkyrie's trajectory as it slammed into carbon dioxide and oxidized dust. The interior's frost faded to droplets with the heat of hypersonic friction. It was like a fireplace had been lit. Flames danced over Engel's smooth carapace, wavering and flickering from outside. More minutes past, the buffeting intensified until the violent shaking disappeared and gave way to a quiet bounce.

"Parachutes!"

Asgard's vanguards fell before ourselves, late to the date, Engel hummed.

"Aye, do you see anything, Engel?"

Flight's burning bright, turning tight, blurring sight.

Rowan waited. There was a shock, jarring hoses and wiring loose from stowage. They'd landed. Sleep retarded his mind, a hangover months in the making. He was supposed to be doing something but

he couldn't think. There was an explosion outside, then another. The concussions were unreal and unsettlingly familiar.

"Artillery! Where've we landed, Engel?"

Dunes of dust, noon's sun lost. We've divorced our course.

A fist punched through the glass porthole and pulled a handle near the upper hatch. What air remained, rushed out, sound disintegrating with it.

"Release the bolts!" A voice screamed over the wireless.

Seconds later, red dust exploded inside the Valkyrie. It was everywhere, fine like flour, energized with static that clung to everything. Engel's wrist bifurcated and released jointed razorblades that extended and slashed his restraints. With precision, she uncoupled Rowan's chest valves and heaved him out of the crashed Valkyrie and onto Asgard. The sky was a filthy yellow like butterscotch, the ground brilliant rust. They'd made it finally. He looked around disoriented. Geysers of dust erupted from the rocky plains. They were square in the middle of an enemy barrage, the planet's weak weight vaulting debris to absurd heights. Someone crouched next to him.

"Something's wrong! We're not supposed to be here!"

It was Kdt. Grov. Rowan hardly recognized him. Asgard had turned his skin coal black. They made for the cover of a nearby boulder, shouldering each other as they staggered.

"Where are we?"

"Over there's Povinis Mons, the volcano. Vanir held territory, which means the Æsiri lines are

this way." Kdt. Grov pointed in the opposite direction.

Rowan peaked around the boulder. Engel slipped out of the shattered Valkyrie and ambled towards them, her sensors busily calculating the trajectory of incoming shells. He caught site of the vast shield volcano, Povinis Mons. Whatever definition of 'mountain' Rowan may've known was obsolete. The terrain ran in reverse, the land falling upward instead of eclipsed by the horizon's limb. There was no peak, no spire or crest, just haze and limitless earth. It was a tumorous planetary bulge like a blood cell that'd failed to split, an aborted attempt by Asgard to give birth.

"She's going to get hit," Grov said.

"No. She's calculating where they're going to land. We've got to wait. She'll show us the way out of here."

Vanir, I fear have honed on the zone we've fallen upon, away dismay, no time to stay and weigh the sublime.

Engel led them from the crash site. The air was saturated with dust. The shelling continued to rain molten sparks down like thundershowers. Rowan altered his infrared filters to a lower register. The world was bubbled and distorted, detail lost in grainy monochromatic outlines. But he could see. They marched on.

"We've got to get off this plain. We're too exposed," Grov barked.

"The telemetry's put our landing ellipse down in No Man's Land. The longship payload's been redirected," Rowan said.

"By who?"

"Niflheim if I know."

The sky was filled with hundreds of Valkyrie kite-chutes, flocks of dark feathered birds drifting down through wispy updrafts. Some spiraled headlong, fire from the blistering flack dissolving their spinnaker winglets. High above, the longship broke up, a fireball sliding in between the warped crescents of Asgard's twin moons. This wasn't supposed to happen. The 3rd Wave was supposed to arrive miles behind Valhalla, far from the Vanir meat grinders. Something had gone awry.

"Ojt. Bahuus was on our longship. I've got to go back and find him." Rowan turned around.

"No time, kommandant. The Vanir have spotters on our landing zone. My overbetjent was with me in the Valkyrie. I pulled myself from the wreckage and crawled away just in time. He was still trapped. A shell hit, dead on. It's too dangerous," Grov said.

Their legs flew out from underneath them, swept clean by Engel's powerful kick. She knocked them both onto the ground and pushed them into a trench ahead. Grov looked up startled. He unsheathed his knife and pointed it Engel as she loomed over him. Rowan crawled into a nearby crag, confused.

"Niflheim! She's a Vanir saboteur-"

Before Grov could speak, Engel collapsed her joints and folded into the trench, fractions of a second ahead of a high-velocity mortar. The blast was strong, blowing the basalt clean of dust. Engel popped up, prone and ready. She'd saved them from annihilation. Rowan pushed off the heavy powder and readjusted his eyes to look around. Grov was reeling, clenching his knife. The channel they'd toppled into was a defensive position hewn from the planetary crust, manmade and eroded from

a century of abuse. Something caught his eye. The walls moved, shifting light like squid chromatophores. They weren't alone. Something was in the trench with them, laying in wait.

"Do you see them?"

"Your krigkniv, Kdt. Guthrie! We're surrounded," Grov roared.

Rowan released the clasp on his blade. The payload specialists hadn't loaded the Valkyries with heavy weapons, no lung-guns, nothing but combat knives sheathed in armor. Someone walked over, then another. It was a lahg of soldiers, all unrecognizable. They were rust-red, covered in dust that gave them uncanny camouflage. Rowan yelled but no one answered.

"I don't see them in infrared. They're talking but we can't hear them."

"2nd Wave kuld-soldat, Kdt. Guthrie, cold like us, no infrared. Sheath your krigkniv."

One soldier stepped out from his unit, an overbetjent. Rowan flipped off infrared for a closer look. The gaunt soldier was an abomination. Bones protruded out from leathery flesh patches, the body just scaffold for his tattered armor. Sunken eyes stared absently on, shriveled lips poorly emulating the act of word making. This was the 2nd Wave, a far cry from what Rowan knew as dysterfolk. They were Frankenstein's monster, bone machines welded to form an automaton heap. Skjærsild had worked miracles since the 2nd Wave deployment, luckily for Rowan. The dysterfolk tapped his transponder and looked at him dumbly. His jaw opened and closed puppet-like.

"We're not on their frequency. He's talking but we can't hear. Retune your transmitter. Find their beacon," Rowan said.

Years have smothered their charms, our peers;
don't fear these brothers in arms.

"Aye Engel."

The 2nd Wave overbetjent aimed his weapon at Engel and motioned the lahg to stay put. They'd never seen an Engelfrigg before. She was something new and possibly threatening. Rowan switched to the 2nd Wave's channel. Using his encryption key, he spoke.

"We're 3rd Wave, Lifthrasir kommandant contingent," Rowan said.

"Stand down," the overbetjent ordered the lahg. His voice chortled, the words swimming in digital soup. The cadence was grotesque. Rowan stood up and saluted, weary of the shrapnel bursts overhead.

"Ojt. Ahnd, sir, this is Lahg 121" The 2nd Wave soldier saluted. "Welcome to Asgard, Gjer Raest, Frykt Ingen."

"Aye sersjant, Gjer Raest."

"Your longship was one of the last to descend. Your telemetry link was lost about a week ago," Ojt. Ahnd explained. He swayed as he stood, his neural feedback weary from eons of battle.

"Niflheim!" Grov roared. "Assassins, draugars, now saboteurs? Vanir spies everywhere-"

"-We don't know it's the Vanir yet," Ojt. Ahnd interrupted. "Kdt. Asperheim's been on the downlink with Ægir's liaison officers. They've been granted access to the Longship Masters' celestial computers. It should only be a matter of time before it's sorted."

"Sorted? We've been decimated!"

"Patience Grov," Rowan said.

"We can't hold this position much longer. We'll take you to Valgrind and Valhalla," the 2nd Wave

sersjant said with an 'undead' sort of exhaustion.

They followed Ojt. Ahnd through the ragged maze of trenches. The lahg menigs walked awkwardly, high stepping like Cossacks. Bulbous tanks hung from the backs of their mummified bodies, grungy hoses piping hydrokraft into leaky neck valves. Rowan could hardly believe these primitive kuld-soldat had held Ragnarok's mythical frontlines for decades. They were 'worse-for-wear' and then some.

Shrapnel and shot wounds pocked their muscle folds, bodies riddled with haphazard scarring. Rowan remembered what Einar had told him. 2nd Wave's Skikk was hasty, lacking the fidelity Skjærsild had culled from years of experiments. Rowan felt pity. He remembered the encounter with Einar and his botched bid to be a kuld-soldat. He could only imagine what shambling decay lay underneath the intelligence officer's robes.

The web-network of the Æsiri trench complex was an anthill of commotion. The 2nd Wave menigs were busily modifying the back lines for the 3rd Wave reinforcements. Rowan knew this wasn't a king's welcome, but in fact the act of a routed army, desperate for reinforcement.

Rowan stepped over small construction sites as he marched, frontline soldiers retrofitting duck-step Muspel dispensers and lung-gun catalyst refills. The 2nd Wave rifles were hydraulic monsters, full of some liquid driven explosive. They looked comical in the hands of the bony 2nd Wave, a far cry from the sleek lung-gun.

"I see it, by Odin," Grov said. "Hammer of the gods."

"See what?"

"Valgrind, the gate to Valhalla. I never thought I'd be here. Once we go beyond the threshold,

we'll be Einherjar."

"Aye, Grov," Rowan replied.

Rowan had seen photographs, but they did it no justice. Valhalla was massive, a mountain of iron, a fortress worthy of the pantheon. The hulking redoubt sat above the plains of Tharsis Montes on a flattened prominence like an immutable citadel looming over the battlefield. Utilitarian and spartan, notions of ornamental fantasy had been cashed in for fortification. Smooth iron battlements rose from the basalt crust of its circular foundation, reinforced by sharp buttresses like a crown of railroad spikes. This was a temple of war, the ominous Valgrind Gate beckoning the Einherjar.

"Looks like the Valkyries are all nearly down," Grov said, glumly. "It's butchery."

They marched up a hill to a spotter's nest near a phalanx of radio dishes. Ojt. Ahnd warned them not to get close. They produced jamming signals directed at the Vanir, so powerful a few seconds would short-circuit cellemaskin, annihilating anyone fool enough to stumble into its beam. These coupled with the Ny Æsiri's orbital transmitters had in affect, shutdown the Vanir's ability to communicate. Rowan looked back at the frontline. The landing zone was fogged with dust and ice. Popcorn rumbles shook the ground, bomblets carpeting the downed Valkyrie jetsam.

"The glut of my kommandant's were riding the longship with us. They've decimated my Suncasapa... all our eggs in one bloody basket. Haven't even fired a shot yet."

"Something's wrong. Who could've corrupted the longship's telemetry protocols?"

"Maybe it was a communication error," Rowan replied.

"I don't know if I believe that," Grov said.

Rowan stood silently, saying nothing. Grov attenuated his vocal synthesizer and spoke in a whisper. "Do you think the Vanir got to Sigurd and made him a double agent?" He looked nervously around.

"I... " Rowan tripped over his words, unsure. "No. It's impossible. Sigurd is berserk for the Vanir. They're his archenemy. It's something else."

Kdt. Grov looked frustrated.

"We can't know at the moment," Rowan said.

"Niflheim!"

Ojt. Ahnd waited up the hill with his lahg. They looked like skeletons from a distance, an army of the damned, top heavy with armament. A few cleaned their weapons while others replaced a warped auto-cannon muzzle.

"As soon as we get to Valhalla, I want you to assemble a Black Hand Gang and go find Ojt. Bahuus. Whatever it takes," Rowan said.

"Ojt. Bahuus? If you don't mind me saying sir, is it worth the risk?"

"He's my charge, Grov."

"He's barely a sersjant, kommandant-"

"-Whose in command here?"

Grov saluted and said nothing.

#

Anemic light crawled over the walls and floor with the stealth of an hour hand. Rowan looked out thin windows. His irises constricted to dimensionless dots as he gazed into the heart of the shrunken sun. He tried to concentrate but thoughts disintegrated, tangential vectors of half-cocked ideas going nowhere. Shaking off the

malaise, he paced. Time burned disposable minutes as his mind drifted. The hosloft was the size of a jail cell, narrow and stark. Besides the communiqué monitor, there was a steel maintenance bed and a weapons rack near the door. Personal items were sacrificed for transit to lighten the longship's burden.

Rowan sat down and toggled the monitor, reading and issuing orders to his logistics officers. It'd been twenty Asgardian days since landfall and progress was slow. The crash landing had taken its toll. Besides a handful of his core Suncasapa, not much was salvaged from the wreckage. His command was in tatters and 3rd Wave field deployment was imminent. He poured through a century's worth of 2nd Wave military history, battle analysis, Vanir technical advancement... nothing.

"Siege... bloody stalemate," he mumbled. Engel unlocked the door and stepped inside.

On Sigurd's word, can he coerce you to converse?

"Aye Engel."

"Kdt. Guthrie, final report's been issued by Ægiri navigation. You should be receiving the communiqué shortly," Sigurd said, stepping into the cramped hosloft. Rowan turned to his monitor and checked it then shook his head.

"Nothing yet. What's it say?"

Sigurd hesitated then spoke. "Electronic corruption of the Valkyries' guidance protocols. Some unscheduled update while your longship was en route... bit of a mystery-"

"-Bollocks, Sigurd. That wasn't just a mix up. We came right down in the middle of the Vanir. What's intelligence saying?"

"No rogue Vanir transmissions. We've been jamming these trolls for decades. They've no

capability whatsoever." Sigurd was aloof, his conniving tone absent.

"What about The Lahg 17 Event?"

Sigurd shook his head.

"The Vanir could've infected the high-gain hub when they seized it, tapped into it so they could send rogue communications whenever they wanted."

"I sincerely doubt it. That was months ago. Einar would've filtered out that sort of conspiracy-"

"-Maybe he's in on it. Maybe we've got a clandestine agent roaming Ny Æsiri sikrings. What about Kdt. Rolig? He slipped through our nets like an eel, and he was in your contingent. Bloody sloppy work," Rowan sniped.

Sigurd stood silent for a moment and gazed out the arrow slit of a window.

"Things like that are always possible, Herr Guthrie. I'll handle it. But we've got to deal with the here and now. We've got to look forward, not fixate on the past."

"History repeats, Sigurd-"

"-That's not what I came here to discuss," he interrupted. "I've drawn up the legion reassignments-"

"-I know. That's one of my messages that did get through-" Rowan said mordantly.

"-A problem with your communiqués?"

"Probably not. I just get this notion I'm being left in the dark."

Sigurd shook his head. "Things have been confusing lately, Herr Guthrie. I've been trying to sort everything out. You've lost half your kommandants, destroyed, missing or captured-"

"-I know-"

"-I need your inputs on the Lifthrasir restructuring-"

"-A little late for all that, eh?"

It was an insult. Sigurd didn't need Rowan for anything it seemed. The restructuring left the Lifthrasir Corp an army in name only with a skeleton crew of kommandants. Rowan's charge had been cleaved. Sigurd, as uber-kommandant, redistributed the 3rd Wave's Suncasapa menigs and lahg-sersjants evenly over the legions like butter on toast. With Lifthrasir's dearth of viable officers and Sigurd's unwillingness to reassign his Lif Corp, there was no more 'joint command'. Rowan was a glorified Suncasapa under Sigurd's revised uber-kommandant leadership.

"Uber-Kdt. Olsdt and his 2nd Wave leadership still believe there's one or two battalions capable of offensive operations. Would you be up to leading them?"

"The 2nd Wave's a spent force. Just look at them, walking, talking ghouls. They're a liability."

"You underestimate them, herr kommandant. Hardened Jotenheim veterans of the Midgard annexation wars, nearly a century on Asgard-"

"-It doesn't matter! This is impossible. The Vanir are juggernauts, maybe invincible. I've poured over every data-crystal archived in Valhalla and bloody hell if brute force is the only strategy I came up with. Everything else is intractable," Rowan said, exasperated.

"Intractable? Is that what you said before you won the Victoria Cross? The Congress of Tyr has expended a sizeable investment of Ny Æsiri wealth to field you, and I'm not about to let their investment founder, Herr Guthrie-," Sigurd argued.

"-My resurrection wasn't up to me, Sigurd. And it sure as hell wasn't an investment. Dead for a thousand years, I'm sure I might've weathered a few thousand more without complaint. As we used to say, sometimes you have to 'call a spade a spade' and from what I can tell... Asgard's a quagmire."

"We're talking the future of civilization, Ragnarok, the final battle and the Ny Æsiri legacy, Baldr and Lifheim, it all comes down to us. It's my job to see us through, and just because some relic from our ancient and glorious past is feeling unnerved about our prospects..."

"-Relic?"

"-I didn't mean it as insult."

"Enough. Christ, we're beating our heads raw! This is trench warfare like I've never seen it. It's nothing like the Flanders. There at least we had Ghurkas, Aussies and Yanks to keep throwin' at the frontline. Here we've got us and we're exhaustible. It's a different algebra. One hundred years and the Ny Æsiri haven't even made it to the Povinis escarpments? To hell with Ragnarok! There're no tricks left in the bloody bag!"

He looked at Sigurd. His black skin rippled with tension like a draugar lurking within. After a moment, he relaxed and paced. Rowan looked at him and said nothing. Sigurd's hubris was guided by a faith in the institutions of Ny Æsiri hegemony, reinforced by a bulwark of prophecy. He was a warrior and loyal nationalist, a personality as old as Sparta. Rowan knew his kind, full of Napoleonic visions of conquest, but his intransigent undead mind was failing him. Zeal was not a substitute for fact.

"I'm your uber-kommandant, Kdt. Guthrie. You had a choice, you volunteered for the 3rd Wave, did

you not?"

Rowan nodded.

"Then you will follow my orders."

Rowan saluted lethargically.

"You can doubt me, but you will deploy on my orders with the assets you're given. Until next time," Sigurd said, tipping his helmet to leave.

Rowan leaned back in his tendril chair and sifted through communiqués. Queues of unread messages sat idle, technical data, schedules, tactical strategy... but nothing from Ragna. It'd been almost a year. He didn't have a photograph, couldn't remember her voice or smile, nothing to spark memory. She'd melted into to abstraction, an artifact embedded in the idle stream of thought. The petals of the chair shifted as he leaned over and gazed at Engel. Her armor glowed sienna, gritty and used. Engel filled the empty space like Ragna's ghost. Her mimicry stirred lonesome addiction like a mongrel waiting over its master's grave, guided by a retarded faith that life and death were simultaneous expressions of self. But logic rued the day, it always did.

Rowan sat up and walked outside.

He leaned over the mezzanine's rail and looked down at the great hall. Smoke hung in the air, belched by vents from the ironworks deep inside Valhalla. Five hundred and forty doors ringed the vast space like a honeycomb, most led nowhere but a few, like his, hid the hoslofts of the 2nd and 3rd Wave kommandants. A deployment had assembled below. Hanging racks dangled over the menigs, feeding them the hydrokraft boost they would need for the endless battle. Etched above Valgirnd's colossal blast door was the cast-metal mosaic of Father Odin himself, lording over his Einherjar.

Besides Valgrind, Valhalla lacked overt Ny Æsiri religious idolatry. It paled to the Viracocha temples of Ny Midgard. Rowan knew the reasons why. This was not meant for the consumption of Ny Æsiri living. This was, after all, a tomb for the dysterfolk undead. It was also a working command bunker, filled with three-dimensional termite flurry that throbbed like a single organism. They were beholden to the endless wars of the afterlife and there was much to do.

"Kdt. Guthrie," Grov saluted. Behind him was the withered and shaky Ojt. Bahuus.

"Bloody hell Grov, you've found him!"

"Ojt. Bahuus, herr kommandant," Bahuus saluted.

Part of his shielding had been damaged. The upper chest plate had been punched in. A mesh had been grafted into the depression but the wound still seeped svartblod coagulant. Burns, probably from a dust fire, warped the side of his boyish face.

"Where'd you find him?" Rowan asked stunned.

Grov looked over his shoulder and pulled the hosloft door closed. "Turn down your transmitter."

Rowan complied. "What is it kommandant?"

Grov looked at Engel suspiciously. "I'd rather not say with her in the room. Pardon me kommandant, but I don't trust it."

"Engel leave us."

I will leave if you please, beware the spies before your eyes, she sang, nodding at both Grov and Bahuus.

"Aye Engel, I'll be fine," Rowan said. With that she left.

"It was my second trip out. Sigurd had a legion deployed with the 2nd Wave forces. They'd cordoned the frontline near the landing zone. I tried to

get up to a salient but they wouldn't let me through. When I told him I was a Lifthrasir fire-kommandant they were even more adamant," Grov said.

Rowan shook his head. Sigurd was playing a kind of game. He was rotten zealous, a tactical berserker. There was no way any Vanir agent could turn his stripes. Something was up. He needed time to sort it out.

"I traversed the frontier trenchworks and came across a 2nd Wave engineering battalion. They were in the middle of evacuating more Valkyries when I noticed Bahuus among the downed kuld-soldat. They'd him fastened to a triage stretcher. A kanon-overbetjent told me he'd been thrown a decameter from the impact. He'd gone coma, shutdown into maintenance mode."

"Do you remember anything, Ojt. Bahuus?" Rowan asked.

"Nothing before Valhalla. I only remember stepping into the Valkyrie on Bifrost, then blackness," Bahuus explained. He hadn't suffered Rowan's onboard 'glitch', no restless half-dreams poking and prodding his interplanetary hibernation. He was lucky for that.

"You feel fit for duty?"

"Of course herr kommandant, it's a privilege, Gjer Raest, Frykt Ingen."

Rowan nodded and saluted.

"I escorted the sersjant back to Valgrind. I asked him what orders he'd been given. He was told by Sigurd's fire-kommandants to relinquish command of the landing zone to Lif Corps, and to not let anyone else through, not even the 2nd Wave infiltration battalions."

"What was the reason?"

"Vanir toxins."

"Vanir toxins?"

"None of the 2nd Wave had been briefed, not even uber-Kdt. Oldst. The sersjant actually asked me if I knew what was going on."

"-What'd you say?"

"I told him I'd my suspicions. Maybe Sigurd had a secret weapon stored aboard our longship, a weapon he didn't want anyone to know about, like a heavy metal device or some ancient technology they'd resurrected to defeat the Vanir. Niflheim if I know," Grov said. He sat down and stared idly at Rowan and Bahuus.

"It'd explain why Sigurd's been cagey, lackadaisical about training and tactics. He could be a rocket away from irradiating Povinis and the whole bleeding lot for all we know. 3rd Wave may've just been deployed for a slaughterhouse mopping-"

"-What's it mean, Kdt. Guthrie?" Bahuus asked.

"It means we don't let this discussion leave this room." Rowan extended his hand. The others laid theirs on his and repeated, "Heder Einherjar."

"There was something else," Grov continued. "I need to show it you."

They left the hosloft. Engel stopped Rowan outside the door. There was a tremor inside her body, a skittish seizure that rattled her limbs. Her movements were girlish, knees collapsed against each other, hands wringing and folded over her abdomen. Even her antennas drooped like a girl's pigtails.

Please do not leave, in my absence there's no defense, rob me of my job see and mercenaries of our enemies will fulfill the kill. I'm nothing

when I'm missing you, she's alone too, bones soaked through... with fear, its so near.

"Engel, what's gotten into you?"

"What's she carrying on about?"

Rowan waved Grov off as he looked at her.

Strangers lay danger at all turns, her love's above ... in the heart of stars, in Midgard, I carry as her emissary's wary guard, embark with you through dark paths she cannot. I am for you. She will be true, stay with me, always two.

"Engel, I'm in no danger."

She shuffled and dragged her feet in protest, but he ordered her to stay put. With that they departed.

#

They descended through the Valhalla's lower levels, a dense labyrinth of interconnected vaults filled with senescent machinery. This is where the 'vraks' worked, rived 2nd Wave kuld-soldat permanently broken from the battlefield. Like kitchen bugs, they skidded and hobbled in and out of the dim overly efficient lights. It was a factory of cripples manning arcane assembly lines of war. Rowan tried to avoid them but couldn't. He noticed one near a heat recycler. The veteran's head had been cleaved, half of it gone. One withered arm dangled useless at its side while the other mechanically loaded artillery catalyst onto a mandrel. A limp hose dangled from a gap in his legless hip, pumping unrefined hydrokraft from a floor spigot to maintain a tenuous humanity.

Grov caught Rowan staring. "Nothing going to waste, eh Kdt. Guthrie?"

He nodded, dismayed.

"I'd rather be annihilated," Bahuus exclaimed.

"I'd never give anyone up like that, Bahuus, not on my watch."

They walked past an archway. Rowan noticed a cavernous space beyond. Grov humored him as he and Bahuus wandered off. They looked down from a platform and saw a silo filled with the ramshackle remains of cannibalized longships. They were antiques, older and smaller than the vessels they'd sailed from Bifrost to Asgard. Dust and soot coated their booster tanks. Frayed wire hemorrhaged through brittle plating, their gaping holds empty like disemboweled giants.

"I noticed them my last trip down. They speak for themselves."

"Aye, Grov."

"There's only enough for maybe half a legion," Bahuus said. "How're we supposed to get home?"

"In my opinion, we're not-" Grov replied.

"-We'll get home, Kdt. Grov... eventually" Rowan said tersely as he glared at Grov. "The 2nd Wave's been at this too long. They've just let the cassus belli overrule thoughts of Midgard, more worried about holding back the hordes than far-fetched homecomings."

"They've been here for over a century herr kommandant," Grov said. He could tell where Rowan was going. "Everyone they knew in Midgard's been dead almost as long as they've been dead themselves. There is no home for these kuld-soldat, only Asgard. We're Einherjar, vassals of Valhalla. That's all we'll ever be."

"We'll never see Ny Midgard again then?" Bahuus stood and gazed at the scavenged husks, despondent.

"Not true-"

"-False hope." Grov flashed him a cold stare.

"No such thing, Grov. Victory first. Then Midgard. We'll ransack, pillage the depths of Povinis and loot the Vanir for plunder, rebuild the longships, and build new ones, whatever it takes."

"A long shot but whatever you say, herr kommandant."

"Enough, Grov." He turned and looked at Bahuus. "We'll figure it out in time-"

"-Time..." Grov huffed, shaking his head. "-Is the reason we're here. We should be going. The korporal's waiting." He turned and walked away.

They descended corkscrew ramps like an auger drill penetrating the planet's mantle. Rowan spotted the abandoned remains of thermal derricks, fallow and tapped. The vent Valhalla had used to sustain its energy reserves was receding like a drought well. The engineers were forced to move the core drillers and gas pumps lower, nuzzling closer to the roaring nickel-iron furnace at Asgard's core. Throbbing hoses ran along side the tunnel walls, piping the recombinants to the ironworks and the kuld-soldat legions above. Like a thread in a mine, they followed the pipes until they arrived at the lower tier, countless feet below Asgard's surface.

Kpl. Skrot, the rig chief of the lower derricks, emerged from a haze of dust and vapor. He was barely ambulatory and walked stiff-legged. A near miss had torn off his shoulder, taking most of his chest with it. Rowan looked around and saw the shadows of vraks manning the core driller, pistons releasing pressurized gases from the planet's heart. They were covered with red mud. There was enough heat and pressure at this depth to form liquid water, impossible at the surface. It

evaporated from the ice strata of Asgard as steam vapor, condensing like sweat over the non-Euclidean tunnel walls.

"Kdt. Guthrie, this is rig chief Skrot, formerly of the 5th Battalion, Lahg 323. He's in charge of thermal excavation and morphological survey."

"Aye, Grov. What is it he's got to tell me?"

Rowan turned to the mangled korporal.

"It's the derrick here, just up and running not but a year ago." His voice was even more gurgled, full of pops and electrical snaps. Rowan shrugged. "It's running dry herr kommandant... already."

Rowan looked at the korporal blankly.

"At these tap points, thermal wells usually flow for five years or more, and then the crust shifts, and we've got to drill deeper. But things have been accelerating," Skrot explained. "The vent's shutting down, relocating under Tharsis Montes. The molten rock's found another channel to seep into. Niflheim if we know where, could be out under the frontlines or by Loki, under the Povinis escarpment, impossible to tap."

"What's it mean?" Rowan asked.

"-It means..." Grov interrupted, "-this vent's got around two years then it's done, no more energy, no more hydrokraft and no more Valhalla."

"What does Uber-Kdt. Asperheim have to say?" Rowan asked the vrak.

"Nothing." The korporal's ebony eyes shifted uneasily.

"He doesn't know?"

"I assume he knows. We dispatched our analysis to Surtur, like we always do right before we bore. Bifrost should've disseminated the data." Kpl. Skrot looked at the three of them, surprised. "The 3rd Wave should've known long before the crossing."

Kdt. Asperheim hasn't mentioned it to joint command?"

"No -"

"-I assumed plans and preparations have been made."

"If there are plans, I haven't heard them."

"But you're the Lifthrasir uber-kommandant, a Suncasapa?" Skrot said, slack-jawed.

"Bloody hell, Grov. What's Sigurd pulling?"

"Maybe it's the Vanir," Bahuus uttered. "Is he worried about spies?"

"He knows I'm no spy. He's bloody brazen when it comes to espionage anyways. I'd say letting one those bastards into your own inner contingent, like he did with Kdt. Rolig, is playing fast and loose in the saddle -He wants to create a feint, keep up appearances for the Vanir."

"It's the weapon," Grov said after a pause.

Rowan noticed it wasn't just Kpl. Skrot who'd stopped working. Other vraks had wandered in, leaving their core loaders and impulse pumps idle to eavesdrop. They'd said too much. With a salute they left Kpl. Skrot and his mutilated battalion to their abyssal slog. They wandered back up through the sinuous interiors of lower Valhalla. He knew of a place, an oasis in the swarm of the wireless ears where they could speak clandestinely.

They entered a derelict corridor known to the 2nd Wave as the 'Aldriroms', the brig specially built for Vanir prisoners of war. Rowan saluted the vrak on duty, a slab of animated meat stationed to throw the occasional switch and cycle gas mixtures. The installation was a formality, a bet on an unlikely eventuality. No Vanir soldier

had ever been taken alive... ever, so Einar had said.

"Officer to inspect!" Grov barked.

The vrak lifted an elongated finger, protruding from an elbow stump and saluted. Rowan ordered the vrak to cycle the pressure and informed him, that unlike uber-Kdt. Olsdt of the 2nd Wave, this Lifthrasir kommandant intended to make acquisition and interrogation of prisoners a top priority. The vrak shrugged, emotionless. Rowan's concocted story had been completely unnecessary. With a flick of the switch, the synchronized doors swung open.

The three walked into one of the dozen cells and sealed the pressure door behind them. A blue strobe flashed overhead as fog seeped up from the floor. Rowan looked around. The room was the size of a kommandant's hosloft but a human space, outfitted with amenities for the living. There was a sink and toilet in the corner near a foldout bed. Sheets and bedding were packed into a small locker at the foot. He wandered over to a wall closet and looked at the environment suit hung inside. Layers of dust had accumulated on the shackle-ready unit, an oversized helmet hovering above it. There was even a small vacuum chamber in the wall where meals could be delivered.

"Can you hear me?" Rowan croaked.

Both nodded. Their skins faded from black to terrestrial anemic blue. They'd been on station longer, almost a month. The skin blotches dissipated slower than it had in the flexing chambers. They tried to speak acoustically but couldn't, their audible synthesizers too parched and polluted. Rowan passed around a cup of water.

Swigging, Grov and Bahuus spat out thick sludge and cleared their throats.

"Turn off the wireless."

Grov nodded then inspected the cell.

"No one can hear us. The air's too thin outside and there's no transmissions," Rowan said, peering out the cell door's porthole.

"Sigurd must know the vents dying-" Grov said.

"-Which means he's got something hidden up his sleeve, unconventional, this hypothetical secret weapon maybe, a way to end Ragnarok quickly. He's keeping us in the dark at our peril. If the Tyrians had authorized him to deploy it, 3rd Wave's senior command would've been briefed including me-"

"Vanir spies, herr kommandant." Bahuus interrupted. "He wouldn't have risked it. Kdt. Rolig was a mole in Kdt. Asperheim's inner circle, an assassin. Rolig sure would've disseminated that information to the enemy given the chance. The plot would've been discovered, and there'd be no point in hiding it any longer."

"Ojt. Bahuus has a point."

"So he's keeping it close to his chest? Worried we're too incompetent? Worried we'd interfere with his triumph and steal the glory? Bloody like Sigurd-"

"Or he might be using us as pawns on the battlefield," Bahuus ruminated.

"-If what you say's true... If it is a weapon, what in Niflheim might it be?" Grov said, shaking his head. "He may've been a keen military mind in Ytter-Midgard, I didn't personal serve with him, but my wager's that his scheme, whatever it might be, is probably more rash than the Tyrians had

planned." Grov leaned back against the wall, shoulders hunched, his mind warm with thought.

"If we go with that. What then? Some radiological device?"

"Hell of a thing, an explosion like the sun itself," Bahuus said. "An ancient siege engine, like the Hammer of Thor smashing through the earth. There'd be nothing left of Povinis if he launched it," he paused. "Maybe he's planning on setting one off underground, disturb the Tharsis Montes magma flow, suck their heat right out from underfoot."

"He'd have to build an elaborate mine system to get underneath the escarpment. Too intricate."

Grov nodded in agreement.

"When we were with the vraks at the derrick, all that haze... It reminded me of the Front. I used to call them the 'wispy horsetails of doom', drifting over No Man's Land like witch fingers, chlorine, phosgene, and mustard gas launched from artillery shells." Rowan's lips grew wet, the synaptic energy warming the fissures of his skull. "Grov, do you know if the Vanir might be susceptible?"

"Chemical agents in gas?" He shrugged. "They can't breathe free on Asgard, the Vanir are self-contained. But they've got forward sikrings, bunkers and strongholds littered across their forward lines. They're probably outfitted with recyclers and scrubbers, some sort of exchanger where gas might sneak in- Do you think Sigurd's got that up his sleeve?"

"I know he was a fan of using phenohol on the Mindre-Æsiri-"

"Niflheim, we all used to do that-"

"-Not like Sigurd, not so excessively. Right Bahuus? You served under him briefly before you

died."

Bahuus nodded. "He told me it was the only sure-fire way to weed the Vanir from the pack. Only problem was it killed most of the Mindre in the process."

"Assuming he's got something like that up his sleeve-"

"-Why don't we ask him about it? Maybe we're just paranoid," Bahuus said. "What if it'll bring us victory?"

"He'll lie," Rowan replied. "Asgard's no longer Tyrian dominion. It's at Sigurd's mercy, and his pride will ruin it. He'll turn Povinis Mons and the Vanir into Audenarde, scorched earth. They'll be nothing left for the immigrants but poison. 'Subjugation not eradication' was what Sverre told me was the mandate. There must be a legacy for the Ny Æsiri. With Sigurd, they'll be nothing, just a rotted husk of a world. The Æsiri will freeze to death on Earth and succumb to their inevitable collapse. There's no victory over the Vanir with Sigurd." There was silence, just the hum of the air's filtration system.

"How do we stop him?" Bahuus said at last.

"Foil his plan or at least discover it," Rowan replied. "Ojt. Bahuus, I want you to mingle with the Lifthrasir loyalists, recruit some eyes and ears of those now serving under Lif. Have them report on suspicious activity. Try to uncover the plan. Give them some excuse about suspected Vanir agents or whatever-"

"-You're going to have to stand up to him," Grov interrupted. "You know that."

Rowan looked at him, confused.

"You're still joint-kommandant of nearly a hoved-legion, including the core Suncasapa

battalions led by Kdt. Sinna, Kdt. Simpel and myself. You've got to challenge his orders or at least try. After you defeated the uber-kommandant at Feltskanse, I saw it in your kuld-soldat, a new respect. It galvanized their loyalty. They'll commit."

"I've no problem handling Sigurd. I'll do what's necessary," Rowan replied uneasily. "We've loitered here too long. Someone will get suspicious. Honor to the Lifthrasir! Gjer Raest, Frykt Ingen!" He held out his hand again, the others laying theirs on top to bind the oath. "Heder Einherjar!"

Rowan turned on his wireless and depressurized the cell. Sound dissolved as the door creaked open. The three walked back into the prison cordon and approached the guard station.

It was Engel.

She was standing next to the vrak. She'd been stalking them all this time. Grov hissed as Bahuus reached for his krigkniv. Rowan quickly ordered him to sheath it and circled her slowly.

"Hold Grov! Bahuus!" Rowan hollered. "She's trying to protect me!"

"She's gone draugar!"

"No! It's her engramming. Let me talk to her."

With her leg extended, Engel's foot lay squarely on the head of the vrak, filament tightly wound around its neck. The vrak sat motionless. Its features may've been disfigured, but there was enough face to express terror at the notion of losing its head.

Readjust your trust, no one to call on. Scheming your demise, I despise by screaming. Listen, my lessons to glisten the truth and sleuth, these... she said pointing at Bahuus and Grov, -are

complicit, a quick flick and he, she tugged on the vrak, -could freeze and seize, impel you to hell in your cell.

"Engel! Let go of him," Rowan roared. She held tight, her head swiveling back and forth, sensors twitching like rat whiskers.

"What's got into her?" Bahuus asked.

"Hyper-paranoia, I don't know. It's me. She's overly protective," Rowan replied. "Both of you, back off and down the hallway, out of sight." Steadily the two shuffled into the shadows and out into the main hall, never turning their backs. "Engel, let go of him!"

Promises made, afraid, missed and weighed, everything's so betrayed.

Rowan approached her and gently grabbed hold of her forearm. It was bear-trap taught, rigid like a swollen tendon. He tried convincing her to let go and ease up on the filament. Black ooze seeped from the vraks withered neck as svartblod coagulated around the wound.

Sold for a song, strung along and now it's gone...

With a whip-crack, the filament reeled inside her carapace. In a single fluid motion she released her foot from the vrak and fell to her knees, hands firmly tucked in between. She rocked herself like a distraught child, her head shaking like she'd been punished for stealing sweets. It was remarkable. Rowan saw Bahuus and Grov inch their way out from the shadows, astonished. What was she doing?

Rowan shook his head and kneeled next to her. "Engel, it's all right," Rowan said, his hand resting awkwardly on her armored shoulder.

She abandoned you, stranded too, my promise is honest, I won't leave like she betrayed you.

"No one betrayed me, Engel," Rowan said.

She continued to shake her head back and forth, like a clock pendulum. Rowan stood and stepped back a few paces. It looked like malfunction, a wind up toy whose spring had sprung.

Trust me, must see, she's with me... never leave.

"I promise you, Engel," Rowan said, turning down his transmitter to whisper. "I'll never leave your side. I trust you."

He stood up and felt strange. It was like heat, some nascent burn in his innards. Water ice clung to his chest. The fire inside was cold but real, a phantasmal sense of life itself. He kneeled to the ground to capture its ghostly fire before it fled, closing his eyes tight to savor sensation. A few pulses more and it was gone.

"Betrayal? What did she say? What are you talking about?" Grov said, walking swiftly towards the both of them. "Who?"

"No one, Grov," Rowan said standing up. "Let's go."

[TD] CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The battle theater was quiet as Sigurd walked the perimeter of the field display. Kdt. Sigurd Asperheim briefed the 3rd Wave Suncasapa about their deployment, the Ny Æsiri's first offensive on Asgard in over thirty years. He was focused, an oily sheen covering his eyes, facial mimics replaced with static flesh. Sigurd had orchestrated this meticulously, probably as long as he'd been dead.

Rowan was nervous, a physiological twitch he interpreted as anxiety, watery mouth, jittering joints coupled with the momentary loss of purpose, like a passing disengagement of sentience. Looking at his chief officers, he saw he was not alone. They were counting on him to inject a little reason into Sigurd's flights of lunacy.

Rowan snapped out of his daze and paced. He studied Sigurd's battle plan again, looking it over, doing the math. He shook his head, unnerved. It was a gambit, a baited hook tactic. Rowan's Lifthrasir would form a delta phalanx and push out along a salient to entice the Vanir ranks forward. With the girth of the enemy forces inward, Sigurd's Lif Corp would stand ground while Rowan's force provided enfilade, drawing from the Lifthrasir incrementally as they swept the attackers. The hope was to overrun the Vanir's forward bunkers and establish beachhead.

Rife with problems, one in particular sifted to the top. It assumed the Vanir would take the bait, engaging Rowan's overextended and vulnerable kuld-soldat. The ridge lacked sap trenches. The

battalions would be exposed and time would be of the essence. One minute too long, and a Vanir artillery barrage would reduce the Lifthrasir to footnotes.

"This is a fool's errand, Sigurd," Rowan interrupted.

Sigurd paused. The contingents kept silent. Grov and Bahuus nodded approvingly as Rowan stepped into the display, blurring the topographic brilliance of the luminescent battle map.

"Kdt. Guthrie, this is a plan torn from your playbook. Don't you recognize it?" Sigurd said sardonically. It was twisted rhetoric meant to disarm Rowan's pragmatism, a logical fallacy to discredit protest.

"Nothing of the sort. The battalions will be overextended along the ridgeline and exposed-"

"-I doubt if that's what you told your lieutenants that December morning-" Sigurd gazed at him with empty eyes and a dead man's smile.

"-That was different. I'd engineered a makeshift sap. We'd cover. But here-," he said, pointing at the greenish contours. "We've got no protection, no bunkers, not even a shallow ditch, nothing."

"Nothing, Kdt. Guthrie? I don't mean to be glib, but you've got more to work with than you're aware. Light and quick, we can overtake the high ground. There's plenty of rock cover and with our own barrage to hollow out foxholes..." Sigurd said, his officers nodding in agreement.

"-It's not the same," Rowan blurted.

"-Explain, herr kommandant."

"We were..." he paused, "-desperate at Ypres. There was nothing to lose. Now, with a fresh army and time-" Rowan chose his words carefully. He wanted Sigurd to submit, to fess to the energy

crisis underfoot. "-At least a few probing attacks to test the Vanir defenses... We need reconnaissance."

"The 2nd Wave has volumes of tactical data on Vanir forward deployments. No need to probe."

"-Ask Kdt. Olsdt! They haven't launched an attack in three decades, Sigurd. We've no way to levy the enemy's defenses."

"Uber-Kdt. Olsdt, how would you rate our success?"

Sigurd turned to the dark figure looming in the shadows. Rowan looked at the 2nd Wave's uber-kommandant to say something but instead the primitive kuld-soldat stood idle. The weathered dysterfolk was a shell. There wasn't enough steam in all the oxidized crust of Asgard to force fresh thought through his synaptic glue. Tedious seconds passed as the assembly gazed at the 2nd Wave chief until at last he whispered, "Nominal."

"There you have it, Nominal. I couldn't agree more. Total victory is not in the cards right now. It'll take awhile. It's hard work, but we need to gain beachhead and this is our best shot," Sigurd explained.

"I regret to inform you, uber-Kdt. Asperheim, but I cannot in good conscience execute this deployment," Rowan said, stiff-lipped.

"Are you disobeying a direct order, Kdt. Guthrie... for the record?"

"I am."

"Mark the time of protest, overbetjent!" Sigurd hollered to a subordinate. "Are you aware of the consequences of subordination?"

Before Sigurd could finish, Rowan pulled the Viracochan glove from his shielding, now full of Asgard's parched rust, and tossed it at Sigurd's

feet. The room fell quiet, black eyes sparring from a distance. The iridescent contours of the battle display disappeared replaced with Valhalla's low-powered amber. The Lif and Lifthrasir Corp contingents pulled back and formed half-circles. Sigurd stepped into the makeshift arena, the glove at the tip of his boot.

"Stridshanske! I invoke Einherjar," Rowan said.

Silent seconds passed. Then Sigurd dropped to one knee and picked up the sealskin gauntlet. With a whisper he accepted the Stridshanske and stood. The room exploded, Roars of 'Einherjar!' volleyed back and forth like a shuttlecock. It was Ny Æsiri warrior code and Sigurd had to oblige melee or face dishonor, a demotion in rank. This was not Feltskanse; he could not resign. This was Valhalla, and Rowan knew it.

"Very well, Stridshanske melee. It's your right by Odin, Valhalla and the Gladsheim muster-"

"Damn right it is," Rowan spat, disconnecting his helmet.

"I beg you to reconsider. Dishonor before battle will hobble your command-"

"-My men know me well enough. Sparring won't change that. This isn't the trench."

"Trench combat? Like Feltskanse?" Sigurd smirked. "You defeated me."

"Bloody well right, I did-"

"-And you mean to do it again?"

Rowan nodded.

"I honor Einherjar then. As you wish. Let's make the 1st Wave proud."

Another round of roars burst from the assembly. Ojt. Bahuus handed him his falskniv and took his headpiece. He tested the knife toggle and watched the phenohol vaporize off the edge. It was a

slashing weapon, curved but with a sharp tip, designed to wiggle its way between armor overlaps.

Rowan knew little of knife fighting. He'd been taught the bayonet for the rare occasion he'd have to go hand-to-hand with an Alleyman, nothing more than a rifle joust, a trench tactic like a bum's rush.

Knife fighting was for guttersnipes, not fit for proper gentlemanly disputes. He recalled stumbling across a gypsy king duel near South London as a boy. The two Romany were fighting for turf. Large men, naked to the waste and surrounded by clan, going at each other like bull terriers. It was brutal. Ferocity bred from a life of poverty and hunger. He remembered there wasn't much method to the madness, just rage. Maybe that's all it took.

He closed his eyes then looked up and stepped into the center. Sigurd crouched down, floating on his legs like a fencer, knife overhand and prone. They circled the floor like shadow boxers. Their dysterfolk eyes, black pools of nothing, hid intention. Rowan focused on Sigurd's falskniv, only to find his face wet with svartblod as Sigurd's free hand landed a set of sharp punches.

Rowan reeled, shuffling back toward the perimeter. His eyes gummed, sight blurred by coagulant. He wiped away the muck and stepped back into it. He had to remember, the knife was the finisher. The rest was brawling. He lunged, only to feel the brunt of a Sigurd's foot land squarely on his chest. The stiff-leg kick threw Rowan's momentum. He tried to shake it, regroup and concentrate, but his mind was slow.

He lacked technique, a tenderfoot in a foreign arena. Dysterfolk hand-to-hand was non-intuitive. Flexibility and reflex were enhanced, flesh wounds

inconsequential. Panicked, he tried to keep the knife close to his body, held like a hammer with his other hand up like a shield. Sigurd backed off but sidestepped to keep him turning. Rowan leapt. Sigurd flashed an impish smile and scooted away.

"Come on! Get it over with!"

"All the time in the world," Sigurd whispered.

Rowan lunged, Sigurd parried.

"All the time in the world, eh? That what Kpl. Skrot told you?"

Rowan spun around. Sigurd paused, cocked his head dumbly.

"You know about the vents," Rowan huffed.

"I haven't a clue what you're talking about."

"Sigurd, we don't have much time. Why are you doing this?"

Sigurd shrugged. "Doing what?"

Rowan charged him, enraged. Sigurd blocked, grabbed Rowan's knife hand and dragged him over an outstretched leg, throwing him to the floor. Sigurd drove a knee into his back, pinning Rowan like a splayed tortoise. His shielding buckled under the crushing weight. Rowan fought to flip himself but couldn't. With a flick of the falskniv, Sigurd cut Rowan's siphon hose and smashed the spigot with the hilt. The leak squealed as the Muspel emulsion steamed. Sigurd jumped up and backed off. Rowan stood and staggered, his strength deteriorating.

"Finish me," Rowan slurred, engulfed in a fog of evaporating fluid.

"What's it feel like?" Sigurd taunted.

Rowan came at him like a stumbling drunk, knife waving blindly.

"Pathetic, can't see, crippled, your reserves spent... -Is that the way you want it out there, on

Tharsis? "

Rowan held the falskniv like an ice pick and side-slashed. Sigurd, like an annoyed sibling, batted away the attack. Rowan's mind iced, thoughts unable to connect. Glue swamped the lines of communication. He rubbed his eyes. Sigurd stood casually in front of him, feet together with arms neatly crossed.

"Damn it, Sigurd!" Rowan mumbled then lunged for his chest.

Sigurd lurched and grabbed his forearm, guiding the blow down and into Rowan's own knee. The blade sunk deep, sliding it in above his greave. The dichloric phenol released and pumped the cryogenic retardant into his arterials. Rowan fell to the basalt, curled like a singed caterpillar. Sigurd kneeled next to him then lowered his transmitter so only Rowan could hear.

"You think I'm glory-drunk, don't you? Remember our 'berserker' talk, right before you set sail? A lifetime ago I know, especially true in my case."

Rowan shook his head convulsively, Sigurd's attempt at black humor unappreciated.

"-A berserker's not about rage, herr kommandant, anger or revenge. It's a state of mind, a single-mindedness, burning the chaff that clutters the sentimental mind-"

Rowan tried to speak but failed, his transmitter full of nonsense.

"-I know how to defeat those troll bastards and that's why I'm uber-kommandant. It doesn't matter what the Tyrians say. I know better. You thought me too proud to accept the truth of Kpl. Skrot's dispatch to Surtur? Niflheim! I'm no tosk! I was there in Ny Midgard when Skjærsild received the relay. I know Valhalla's running on fumes. I admit

I'm overconfident -everyone has faults- but that's because-," he paused and leaned in, eyeball to eyeball, "-because, I know what it takes to win!"

"-Enough, uber-kommandant! Release Kdt. Guthrie," Grov said, shifting nervously.

Sigurd looked back and nodded then stood. He turned up his transmitter and spoke to the room. "I am uber-Kdt. Sigurd Asperheim of the 3rd Wave. All of you will follow my directives without question, understood?" The Suncasapa saluted. "Be ready to deploy."

The chamber emptied, leaving Engelfrigg, Grov and Ojt. Bahuus to tend to Rowan. Engel picked him up in her mechanical arms and cradled him. She coupled her hydrokraft hose to a reserve valve like a nursing baby. Grov administered the phenohol antidote, releasing the frozen catalyst while Bahuus jimmied the falskniv from his knee.

"Niflheim, what happened to you out there?" Grov said.

"-He won, Grov," Rowan stuttered.

"Damn right, he did, spectacularly."

"Where's that leave us?" Bahuus asked.

Rowan shook his head.

"What's our plan?"

"Plan?" Rowan slurred.

Grov dropped his head, eyes inert and resigned.

"Follow our uber-kommandant's orders, sersjant." Rowan moaned.

"-You were going to stand up to him," Grov grumbled. "He'll ruin us, burn through us like flame through foil."

"We'll burn even quicker, and I'm going to see to it," Rowan said, "We'll grease the skids."

"When'd you decide that?"

"Just now."

Grov grimaced.

"Two years?" Rowan laughed, flaccidly. "Sigurd's not going to last two weeks! Pulling the plug on me there in the arena gave me an idea. We'll suck the energy right out from underneath Lif Corp, fuel our own victory."

Grov stood slack jawed. "A one-off shot, secure victory in a blitz and pinch the Vanir from behind?"

Rowan nodded. "It's the only way, Grov. The 3rd Wave will never be stronger. If we succeed, Sigurd will be forced support our bid. Taking territory inch-by-inch is what Sigurd hopes to do. I've seen it firsthand, a stalemate scrum. There's no time."

"Niflheim! How'd things get so desperate?" Grov lamented.

"When hasn't it been desperate?"

#

The frontline emerged through dust tornados and airborne flotsam. Rowan searched the wastes, looking for glimpses of Vanir soldiers. He wanted to know the enemy, see the Asgard Vanir firsthand. Ranging honed their position, but visually they manifested as little more than flickers of gunfire. He panned his monocular to Sigurd's positions, quiet with no activity. Sigurd ordered his legions to hunker down and let Rowan's Lifthrasir take the brunt.

Rowan stepped out of the bunker and down to the adjoining gun emplacement. Engel in lockstep followed. She grew curiously silent after the Stridshanske, her music replaced by a choreographed shadow stalking. She acknowledged him now only with nods and shakes.

The auto-cannon's recoils blurred as it cycled, an unstoppable beast hungry for reload. The piston

manifolds hammered with the hum of a Sopwith Pup, sending a fusillade of phosphorescent spark downrange. Snorts of exhaust filled the trenches of Sahna sikring, pooling like rainwater around the kanon-sersjants' feet.

Ojt. Bahuus helped a lahg reconnect a Muspel feed to an auto-cannon. Rowan fiddled with the console and saw the reservoir glowing calm blue, fully fueled. He nodded, satisfied. Kdt. Sinna and Kdt. Simpel were ordered to dispense lung-gun catalyst at will to their legions. Hydrokraft was not be rationed. The Lifthrasir were to go for broke.

"Any word from your Lif contact?" Rowan asked.

The overbetjent gave orders to the fire team as he jostled his way over to Rowan. "Not yet. Our mole hasn't heard anything, operationally speaking. If Sigurd's got plans, he's only sharing them with Odin-"

Rowan shook his head, "-making us sacrificial lambs."

Pops rippled along the trench wall. They ducked. The rounds fell like heavy rain over the parapet. Puffs of dust let loose in the thin air, coating everything not hermetic. Grimy legionnaires melted into the auburn landscape, what Grov had jokingly called 'Asgard livery'.

"What about the hydrokraft?" Rowan asked.

"The Lif turncoat's doing me a favor, just like you requested. We've got unrestricted access to Valhalla's pipeline at the dock-works. I told the vraks to keep it quiet," Ojt. Bahuus said.

"I disabled Sahna's hydrokraft monitors and all the portable units. No fuel gauges to give us away. All spigots are at full flow."

"Then that's it?"

Rowan nodded. "If Sigurd's giving us to the Wicker Man, we're going to bleed him, maybe achieve Ragnarok victory if we're lucky."

Bahuus nodded glumly.

"Do we have a damage assessment?"

"Simpel is maintaining their sector, but Kdt. Sinna's on the lip of the forward barrage near Toe-Stub Jaundice. His legion's three quarters operational, heavy casualties."

"-Must be spotters, the Vanir's got 'em hid up close, right underneath our noses-"

"-Spies?"

Rowan shrugged, exasperated.

"Any word from Grov?"

"Not yet. Let's go take a look."

The forward lines were drenched with smog, a concoction of ionized sand, frost and the particulate remains of incendiaries. Vision hazed in all spectra. Rowan, nearly blind, groped the trench as he ambled to Sahna sikring's forward observation post. Engel handed him his monocular. He tuned the noise filter and scanned the ridge traverse. Beyond it, he spotted a plume mushrooming through ice haze and mortar dust. It had to be Grov, his last position pinpointed from the transmission logs, no status in over an hour.

"Anything?-" Bahuus asked.

Rowan shook his head. "Bloody reckless fool."

He dispatched Bahuus with orders to the battalion kommandant. They were to assemble at Sahna for a push to relieve Grov. The enemy was holding ground fiercely, a thorn thicket quickly bleeding the 3rd Wave. The Vanir's forward bunker, a yellow boulder heap nicknamed 'Toe-stub Jaundice', split the Lifthrasir from Sigurd's idle Lif like a wedge. The position was formidable,

giving the Vanir potshots from safety. Sigurd was antsy to overrun it and had ordered Rowan to attack. A direct assault would be butchery so Rowan disobeyed. He'd other ideas.

"What about 'Jaundice and Sigurd's orders?"

"Ignore it, Bahuus. Turn off our encryptor and make it look like a communiqué fault. It'll buy us time," Rowan said.

Bahuus saluted. "Lead battalion's reformed and ready to inspect."

They both wound their way back through the trenchworks. Rows of army ants gazed at him, eyes bulging black, and a film of rust powdering their charcoal flesh. He paused to inspect a menig's weapon. Skjærsild had permanently arc-welded the kuld-soldat's nerves to an open circuit, near hits rousing not a wince. It was a far cry from the vomiting, knee-knocking young Tommies he remembered pulling from the Flemish mud.

The menig's battle order was perfect, like it'd been mechanically assembled. His lung-gun was optimally configured for Asgard. Rowan handed him back his weapon and returned to the forward line.

Bahuus launched a flare marking the push. The lahgs swarmed the sikring parapet and scurried up through the lower boulder fields. The Vanir batteries lulled while the enemy gunnery shifted to the ridgeline. The push emboldened 'Jaundice to attack Lif's forward saps, forcing Sigurd to expend precious hydrokraft. He roared over the wireless, furiously ordering Rowan to counter. With a flip of the switch, Sigurd's rottweiler snarls faded to babble.

Rowan saw them at last, off-white flecks emerging from gopher holes. The Vanir looked like beetles, bulky but maneuverable, the planet's low

weight giving them the heft needed to haul their heavy life-support. Undead did not move in such ways, cautious, fluid and mortally aware. Rowan sensed the life inside their suits.

"They're charging the Lif lines!" Bahuus yelled.

"Sorry Sigurd," Rowan whispered. "Couldn't help you now if we wanted."

Need to chance our advance, lest we cede our speed, keep going, avoid slowing, Engel beckoned. Rowan said nothing, perplexed. It was the first time she'd said anything in days.

The battalion followed a haphazard traverse, spacing out to form skirmish lines. Vanir shells detonated along the hill. The empty atmosphere let loose the molten fragments, mincing the lahgs with fantastic speed. He looked back and saw wrecked and limp menigs, amputees pathetically firing at unseen assailants.

"We've got to keep moving!" Rowan hollered.

"Kdt. Sinna's been overrun," Bahuus said, tapping his receiver. "We're cut-off."

"Has the Muspel been shut off?"

Bahuus shrugged.

"We're going to move up the battalion, join Grov and secure a perimeter until support can rally," Rowan said.

"Lif command's not responding," Bahuus said, tapping his receiver. "We've pushed too far. It's our own jammers. They're interfering with the wireless."

They fought on, dashing across the exposure like rats chasing the piper. Enemy batteries lit up the dust, distant flashes flickering through vapor. The red desert was undergoing a morphological shock, the planet's crust tilled from bombardment, small knolls destroyed, others forming. He led the

battalion remnants through a narrow gap in the hills and down into the lee of a shallow caldera. He looked around. The battalion was decimated, only a handful of fractured lahgs tumbling into the breach. The violence of the salvo continued, torrents of shrapnel and debris raining down.

Anemia swelled with each lung-gun burst. Battle instincts overwhelmed Rowan's need to aim efficiently; everything was pandemonium. It wasn't just him. Sluggish kuld-soldat wallowed, a few already succumbing to coma. Rowan looked at Bahuus. A high-velocity shot had torn through his upper thigh, shattering his shielding and exposing his withered necrotic meat. Stunned, Bahuus hadn't noticed.

"Where is she?" Rowan said, looking around frantically.

"Do you hear the ringing?"

Bahuus pulled his helmet off and slapped the receiver. He pulled at his ears, tortured and anguished like earwig hatchlings run amok.

"It's so loud!" he cried. "Do you hear it?"

"No," Rowan said, confused. "Where is she, overbetjent? Where's Engel?"

Rowan's mouth seethed with panic. He stood and looked around. The caldera was no caldera at all but ground zero for some massive kiloton-caliber impact. Legs, torsos and other various kuld-soldat fragments littered the slag. This had been Grov's last stand, the mushroom cloud delivering the deathblow in a kilometer sized blast. It'd been a direct hit, wiping out Kdt. Grov and his contingent.

"Christ! What kind of weapon did this?" Rowan said, stunned.

Suddenly the ground grew quiet. The onslaught ceased.

"The Vanir are holding fire, probably moving in to mop up."

"What can we do?" Bahuus' angst was obvious.

"I don't know, Bahuus," Rowan said. "It seems I've grossly underestimated the tenacity of our enemy. What's our position?"

"Unknown," Bahuus said, grabbing at his ears again. "The ringing won't stop."

Rowan demodulated his wireless and heard nothing.

"Viracocha Con Tiqui," Bahuus prayed in the ancient cant. "Heder Valhalla, omfang foran oss, Odin gi lov til oss heder, ditt mager krigers."

"We're lost out here. Ragnarok's lost... and so quickly," he smirked, stupefied. "A hypocrite victim of my own hubris." Rowan looked into the sky for Earth and felt little. He tried to remember her face but couldn't.

He stumbled around, dilating his eyes to catch more light. Engel was nowhere, although her destruction seemed near mathematically impossible. She could dodge a hail of small arms fire like snowflakes, safe as houses. It didn't make sense. He looked at the handful of kuld-soldat surrounding him. Most were doubled over, holding their ears. The ones still in arcoma, hemorrhaged svartblod from their eyes and mouths.

"What's happening to them, overbetjent?"

Bahuus didn't speak so much as gurgled, jabber interrupted by throaty hisses. It wasn't just him, the whole lot of menigs snarled in chorus. Ripples of bulging flesh strained at the straps of their shielding, faces swelled like sponges. He gripped his lung-gun tight and swept it over the sea of

dysterfolk changelings, all dumb and insane. A few leapt up on all fours like apes and crept around him slowly, attack dogs heading the call of an unseen master.

"All draugars! -God damn it, Engel! Where are you?"

Combat fatigue brought on the dysterfolk draugar, but why so many? It was no coincidence. Rowan grabbed the delirious Bahuus and dragged him out of the crater, his leg useless. The overbetjent carried on with religious mumblings. Rowan begged him to be quiet, but near-coma polluted his brain. He found a shallow cliff and gently slid Bahuus over the lip. Jumping down, he peered through a fissure. The draugar horde hadn't followed. Something caught his eye; a silhouette perched on a nearby hill.

"Engel."

She'd snuck away during the fighting. He zoomed in and noticed her crouched, aiming a weapon with an acoustic muzzle attachment. Rowan remembered the device, a crowd control apparatus used on the Mindre in Ytter-Midgard. It'd been a favorite of Sigurd's varm-soldat. But here someone, or something, had re-engineered it for a more nefarious purpose. The ringing in Bahuus' ears had affected the rest of the kuld-soldat, infecting them with what Grov called the 'black lycanthropy'.

"Ambush!"

Rowan remembered the Valkyrie bays on Bifrost. The fluid bag they'd administered to the kuld-soldat wasn't draugarism vaccine at all, but its trigger. A Vanir saboteur had gotten to the svartblod emulsion, some high level engineer at Skjærsild working for the enemy. It was the only

explanation. Whoever they were, they'd rearranged Engel's circuitry for betrayal. He looked at his flesh, touched his face. Nothing. He'd been passed over. It was too much of a coincidence. Hundreds mutated, but he'd been left unharmed? Serendipity was the stuff of lovers and poets and Rowan knew it. The assassins had left him alone for a reason.

"Who got to you Engel?" Rowan whispered. "It was only a matter of time before these monsters snuck in and did their mischief."

He felt a tug. Rowan looked down and saw Bahuus staring back at him, eyes furious and empty. Distended fingers ripped at Rowan's greaves as the sersjant gnawed his leg. He took the butt of his lung-gun and cracked the overbetjent in the head, knocking him back. Bahuus grabbed hold with juggernaut might and pulled him to the ground. His strength was unreal. Usually a gang of menigs was needed to manhandle a draugar and Rowan was drained. He pulled the krigkniv from his shielding.

"Well brother, here's to you." He knew what he needed to do.

He threw his weight into Bahuus, struggling to pin his neck with his knee. The overbetjent fought like a rabid animal, his last threads of humanity dissolved. Rowan positioned the krigkniv over the throat and hacked. The draugar dug its fingernails in and ripped at Rowan's face.

Sparks marked the cut, quickly doused by svartblod oozing into the gaping wound. The body ripped with spasm like a slaughtered beast. Vivisected, dysterfolk were more machinelike inside. Wire lattice intertwined small pneumatic tubes, supporting the spinal cord artifact like a truss. The cellemaskin overhaul had done away with

the viscera almost completely. Bahuus' helmet fell off as Rowan dropped the severed head to the sand.

He was Rowan's master sergeant and he hadn't been able to protect him, pathetic. He looked at Bahuus' head, the stump covered with residue. Erik Bahuus was maybe twenty when he'd died. Now he'd died a second time. It was a god-awful waste and Rowan felt responsible. This poor boy, mutated into a weapon, deserved more of a burial than this.

"Sorry Bahuus."

He reached down and closed his eyelids. Rowan's mouth salivated as his skull warmed. He pinched his eyes, trying to blur them. Erik Bahuus faded to black blotches in a sea of orange. Rowan strained to remember, but the folds of his oatmeal-like mind leaked, the image lost in the fleeting nonsense of his feeble brain.

"I'd almost gladly trade you places in this miserable drama. Sorry I couldn't get you home, brother."

He got up, dropped his lung-gun and staggered shiftless over the dunes. His hydrokraft levels were critical. Each step took longer than the last but he was desperate to escape the draugar madness. Vapor purged from his eyes, a sobbing he could not control. He fell to his knees and crawled. It was dusk now. Everything blurred in the twilight. He prostrated himself and rolled over to gaze up at the budding starscape.

"Richards' coming for me finally, leading the devout to the meat-grinder."

He shut his eyes then slowly opened them to find Engel standing there, resting her rifle on her hip. With her head scornfully tilted, she peered at him with her gigantic eye. He gazed at her in

shadow. Ragna's soul and the endearing girlish awkwardness bled through Engel like shafts of daylight. She didn't whistle or sing but stood silently, her rifle trained on him.

"Why are you doing this?"

Engel waved her rifle, cuing Rowan to stand. The acoustic muzzle had been removed, exposing the weapon's business end. He obeyed. She motioned him to march away from Valhalla, towards Povinis Mons and enemy territory.

"Say something!"

Rowan felt the rifle barrel nudge him in the back.

"Quit this deaf dumb nonsense!"

He turned and held up his hand, begging her to stop. She snapped the gun to her shoulder and blew part of his right palm in two, ripping half his fingers off completely. The blast threw Rowan to the ground. He clutched his mutilated hand. There was no pain, just tingling. He crawled away on his knees, head plowing the dust.

"Let me go, Engel. Ragna's there inside you. Help me get home to her. Vidar will make me whole. We'll be together again."

She reached down and grabbed him by the armpit, picked him up and pushed him ahead. With a wave of her gun, she ordered him forward. He was her prisoner. She was taking him to the Vanir.

"Betrayal!" He cursed.

Flu-like exhaustion slowed his pace. His corpse was beginning to switch into maintenance mode, steeling energy from his brain chemistry to sustain the core. Each step turned into a stumble, until he couldn't walk anymore. He dropped to his knees. She snapped the rifle to her shoulder again and prepared to fire.

"Mercy!" He held up his mutilated hand. "I promised you Ragnarok and I'm sorry, Ragna. I've failed."

Engel held fire, head twitching side to side.

"You, Ragna, were the only thing alive in this nightmare." Rowan was delirious, words tumbling from his mouth like baby spit. "Undead but not dead, I'm nothing without you."

Engel lowered her rifle and surveyed the rolling barrens. Rainbows swept over her eye as she rearranged its lens to focus. They waited. She looked back at Rowan and stepped away from him. Her arm articulated strangely as she removed a blue Muspel cartridge from her spinal compartment. Rowan reached for it, desperate.

"Ragna," he slurred. "Give it to me, or I'm going to suffocate."

Engel circled him, the condensate cylinder swinging from her clenched fist. She stopped and sat the container in the sand, its hose dangling loose. Rowan crawled for it. For every foot he struggled, she'd pull it just out of reach. It was sadistic game. She was taunting him. Why not just end it, put a bolt through his head and be done?

"Say something."

At last, he managed to grab the hose nozzle but was too weak to connect it. Engel stood up. Her antennas were fidgety, like a bloodhound's nose sniffing the air. She slung her rifle. Then, like a shot, she turned and marched off in the direction of Sahna sikring. Yelling was fruitless and he knew it. He could only watch her walk away. He struggled with the Muspel, but coma was on top of him.

"The heart revived to doom itself again. Anna, it looks like you found another battlefield to

haunt."

Time dissolved, sleep recycled into perpetual stasis. Vidar called it a 'reactive coma'. It was his a little trick to keep the dysterfolk from complete oblivion. Engel had beached him here for a purpose, something more than just salvage.

Rowan waited.

#

He sat there, the letter pegged to a timber with the bayonet. The tea was cold but he drank it anyway, eyes empty. He'd read it only once, cold cursive without flourish. Rowan pictured Anna at her small writing table, penning a letter she could barely stand to write and looking forward to the moment she could drop it into the Royal Mail and forget, forever.

Rowan pulled a cigar box from his footlocker and lit a Pall Mall. The photographs were yellow and water-warped but intact. It was one picture in particular he was looking for, a picture they'd taken on holiday in the Scottish Highlands. He wanted to show Anna his clan's homeland before he was to be shipped off, tour the lochs and visit his favorite Speyside distilleries. She was wearing a wool polo-neck, bright eyes gazing through windblown hair. Her arms were wrapped around her knees, expressing a girlish vulnerability.

He assumed Anna's despondency was due to the pain of seeing him leave for war. But Rowan gave it another look. He turned up his oil lamp. Something was different. Glandular swallows dried his throat as sweat trickled down his spinal trough. Her inscrutable eyes... God, had he been wrong about them? War hadn't sown Anna's despair; it was Rowan who'd done that. He'd dismissed the

pouting and unease as womanly emotion. Her greatest fear wasn't his death, but in fact, the prospect he'd return and trap her in a marriage she did not want.

"God damn it, Anna."

He pulled the bayonet out and folded the letter, shoving it back into the cigar box. His hand trembled as he smoked the fag to the butt. The Dixie kettle whistled. He kicked it over along with the stove, letting the lit Kerosene pour over the floor. A minute passed as the flames spread, until at last, he threw his trench coat over the fire. The chaffed leather smoked with each stomp. Fumbling his Webley from the holster, he cocked the hammer and held the pistol to his temple.

A minute passed. He tossed it to the table and collapsed onto his cot, pulling his hair in a tantrum. The truth he'd fenced off for years burst its banks. Anna, had never loved him, not the way he'd thought. Now, like an illusion, the images shifted and he could see what'd been in plain sight all this time. The despair was unrelenting.

Then something beeped on the wireless. Slowly, he got up and scrawled a short note down on a pad, not bothering to decode it until the taps had keyed out the entire message. It took minutes, English Morse, rudimentary and difficult to decipher. It wasn't from the Amiens. It was another transmitter. The communiqué was an older code from an outdated dispatch. Something he would've dismissed outright if not for the fact that this particular message carried his name.

Lt. Rowan A. Guthrie, HM 242nd

Request your presence at, 50°49'36" N, 3°35'03" E. 07:15 17/12/17. Look for our signal. Suisse Frانس negotiable in exchange for ciphertext: 'zephyr'. Only Lt. R.A. Guthrie. British counter-intelligence agents will be shot on sight. You must come alone. We are aware of your unusual predicament.

-Kdt. S. Asperheim, liaison

Rowan unrolled a moldy map and laid it out over the table. The coordinates took him into No Man's Land, across the Sheldt River and close to Audenarde near a salient bulge where no army had managed to make inroads. The rendezvous was a few days away, little time to ruminate. He tore the page from the tablet, hid it in the pocket of his greyback and peaked outside. No one, the trench was empty.

He opened the cigar box again and gave Anna's picture a last look. He lit another Pall Mall and extended the flame to the photo's corner. The paper's soaked emulsion slowly burned, the ashes falling in clumps.

"This war is lost."

[TD] CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"Wake up," said the voice. "Wake up, skraeling!"

Rowan lay prone on something metal. They'd inserted barbed hooks in his ankles and hand, restraining him. Freshly into arcoma, detuned eyes blinked. Someone had attached the Muspel container to his chest spigot. The bunker lamps ran rich and bright, vision just islands of shadow blurred by brilliance.

"He's coming round." It was a female Vanir. She pointed a rifle at him.

"They've gone far in perfecting this nastiness, haven't they? ... These new skraelings."

"We knew they were coming. It was only a matter of time."

The Vanir dialect was rich, choppy and archaic but queerly more understandable than Ny Æsiri.

"Sit him up. Let us have look."

"Is he the only one we've captured?" said the male sergeant.

"Of the new lot?" She nodded. "Most die like bugs in jar, run out of juice in an hour. This skraeling came with an extra fuel cluster. Look Sturlingson." She picked up the Muspel container, inspected it, and dropped it back into his lap.

"Bit of a prize, eh? They say this one's a senior commander. Look at his insignia."

Rowan rubbed mucous from his eyes and looked around. It was a command bunker, full of air and sound. Two Vanir soldiers were crouched next to him, dressed in the thermal pajamas they wore underneath their hulking combat suits. Asgard's rust loomed outside the bunker window, blast

shutters open. The distant artillery muted by the hum of impeller ducts.

"Those cheekbones... no tattoos, he's Caucasian-"

"-Like us."

The two soldiers scattered when the door slid open. Two officers walked in, a man and a woman. Rowan didn't recognize their rank but took them for mid-level commanders. The man was tall and lanky, balding with steely eyes. The woman was blonde, radiant like a glacial sunset. Both were tall -but all Asgard Vanir were tall, bodies adapted to the planet's weak weight. Rowan adjusted his irises and saw a gold cross dangling round her neck.

He pointed to it and mumbled, his modulator clogged with grit.

"Give him some water, Cpl. Hallson."

Rowan swigged from her canteen and hacked mud as he attempted a few embryonic words.

"Why do you wear a cross?" Rowan rasped.

"-That accent. He's not Æsiri."

The woman approached and knelt down. Arctic-blue eyes looked him over, incredulous. "Why do I wear this?" She said, holding up the chain. Rowan nodded. "I'm Lutheran. What about you?-"

"-Pagan," the sergeant interrupted. "All these skraelings are Tyrian pagans-"

The woman ordered the soldier to be quiet.

"Anglican-," Rowan mumbled. "Scottish Episcopal."

The male officer interrupted. "Scotland? -Impossible."

"Impossible... maybe, but we've found something that actually is impossible or damn near insane," The woman activated a handheld console. Finnson

shrugged. "Isotope dating says this one died a thousand years ago."

"Lt. Gunnar, tell Jonas his equipment needs calibration-"

"-The oldest skraeling specimen we've captured was about one hundred and fifty years old -This Anglican has that beat tenfold," said the female lieutenant.

"When and where did you die, skraeling?" Cpt. Finnson seethed, eyes glowering.

"My name's Rowan Guthrie, formerly of His Majesties 242nd Regiment. I was killed in 1917 in the Italian Alps by an avalanche-"

"-This thing doesn't know what it's talking about. Kristjana, what sort of evil those zealots been dabbling in?" Cpt. Finnson fumed, mouth agape. "Prose Edda prophecy nonsense, you think?"

"-They brought me back," Rowan mumbled. "They thought I could help them with the war."

"Christ!"

"-Sgt. Sturlison, Cpl. Hallson, move the prisoner into the briefing room for interrogation. Then report to your platoon. Mention this to no one." Kristjana ordered the underlings.

The soldiers saluted then unhooked Rowan from his restraints. Svartblod oozed from his wounds and pooled on the floor, slow to clot. He'd been on Asgard too long. White patches pocked his piceous flesh, the skin inelastic and permanently deformed by vacuum. With a heave, they hoisted him onto a litter and moved him to another corner of the garrison.

Disoriented, thoughts waxed fluid. Rowan struggled to make sense of one particular fact. Why, if he'd been betrayed, this intricate plan months in the making, and with such an elaborate

cast of characters? The Vanir were oblivious. It was like the right hand knew not what the left was doing. Expending so much risk and blood to abduct him on the battlefield, only to scratch their heads, confused when he'd finally arrived? It was ludicrous. The two soldiers threw him into a high backed chair and walked out, leaving him alone with the lieutenants.

"This is intelligence officer Lt. Kristjana Gunnar and I'm Cpt. Manus Finnson. Tell us how you got here Rowan?"

"I though you'd tell me?" Rowan croaked. "You abducted me, right?"

"This one's mad," Finnson exclaimed.

"No captain, he's disoriented. Let me try." She leaned in close. "Rowan, let me phrase the question differently. How do you think you got here?"

"Betrayed by your Vanir saboteur." He coughed. "They infiltrated our logistics on Bifrost and sabotaged my simulacrum back on Earth. The humanoid turned on me in battle, marched me here."

"The Vanir," Manus scoffed, batting an eye at Kristjana. "Our people haven't set foot on Earth in over two hundred years -Do you know who you're talking to?"

Rowan shook his head.

"I'm Brigade Lt. Captain Finnson of the Island-Surtur Colony Einn Defense Force and this-"

"-Quiet captain. He's talking about the Midgard Uprising, the other 'Vanir'." Kristjana shushed him. "Rowan, the Uprising, what do you know?"

Rowan shrugged. They were interrogating him, looking for news from Earth. The Einherjar jammers had strangled their communication.

"The insurgency in Midgard? Is the Tyrian regime close to collapsing?" She asked.

Rowan shook his head. A silent minute passed.

Something dark awoke within, the truth that he'd neglected for so long at his own peril. He knew his conscience, and he'd betrayed it. His mind furiously thumbed through the pages of excuse -But this world was so new and the dysterfolk afterlife mystifying... Who was he to judge mankind's sole survivors? How could he have possibly known? He'd been dead for a thousand years. No one could've expected him to... -Wasn't this the way the world had always been?

Lies filtered through Rowan's begrudging entitlement, repackaged into ego and spite. He'd glommed on to the theory that the universe paid itself in the zero-sum economy, Fate's Libra. So much had been taken from him in life, he deserved the charity of his afterlife handlers. That was the way he saw it. God damn it, if he wasn't going to soak it up! This was owed, and he wanted it so badly.

But now, it was obvious like the recollection of a morning's dream. The Asgard Vanir weren't coordinating their brethren in Ytter-Midgard at all, or visa-versa, despite Sverre, Sigurd and everyone else's facts to the contrary. The insurgency had little or nothing to do with Tharses Montes or Ragnarok. The word, 'Vanir' was a Ny Æsiri catchall to demonize and marginalize. Guilt burned through Rowan's brain-stuff.

Like The Judgment, justice always has its day. And Rowan's day was today. The puzzle pieces fit together in ways he always knew they did, this strange new world with its old human problems.

The Mindre were the Ytter-Midgard 'Vanir', rebelling against military occupation. He remembered the abuse, herded into cordons, gassed and beaten. They were the proletariat chattel the Ny Æsiri exploited through fear and violence, an ethnic caste that for whatever reason proved unworthy of their humanity. Now they'd formed a partisan army to resist their slavers.

Things would be different after the Ragnarok, so he was told. The era of Lifheim would be the new Halcyon Days, so much energy no one would want, not even the meek. Sverre promised the Mindre Æsiri would be liberated alongside all Æsiri... more lies. 'Liberation' was semantics hiding Ny Æsiri crimes. There was no altruism at work, just greed. Rowan's eyes drifted, despondent. A synthetic sigh escaped evacuated lungs as his shoulders convulsed. With oily tears, the boy soldier emerged, the remnants of his soul now battling to save its last shreds.

"Such a fool," Rowan whispered.

"Speak up. Might as well talk, Rowan. You're going to die in Islander custody anyhow. We keep no prisoners of war."

'Islanders' were what they called themselves.

"Already dead." Rowan managed a smile.

Manus pulled out a firearm and aimed it between Rowan's eyes. "I'm not joking!"

"Neither am I," Rowan said. "I've just a few days left." He held up the canister of hydrokraft.

"Captain, please-"

"-He could be a suicide troop, or something worse-"

"-We've hobbled and scanned him, removed his weapon and disabled his wireless. -He's a wreck

but completely harmless-" Kristjana said.

"-A skraeling abomination more like it." The captain holstered his weapon.

Words of debilitating shame burped from his mind in a mumble. It was like a spring had sprung in his braincase. He grabbed at his ears and mouth, tugging on them like an infant. His mouth locked shut, zinc teeth cracking. Svartblod poured from his nose as his eyes glowed pale. The Islander officers stood back. Chain reactions of neural jitter rang his cranium like an electrical storm.

He forced his mouth open to speak but the molecular fire continued to burn, all babble. The tunings and religious indoctrination eroded like paper in water. The word 'desecration' hummed on his tongue, 'desecration' over and over again.

#

Mid-winter's eve and the clouds were snow-pregnant. He walked through Manchester's dark streets back to the row house where he'd rented an upstairs room. Rowan was the sole boarder. The widow below kept to herself most days but would occasionally entertain tea. She took more comfort in his footsteps than idle conversation, which was fine with him. It was his last term at university, graduation in the spring and with any luck, a job and marriage.

The snow faired in the cobbles, giving way to a smooth shuffle as he walked. He pulled his scarf tight and shuddered with a frigid alleyway gust. Strange, he thought, quitting time, no bustle. Cotton quiet filled the air, interrupted only by distant barking. He rubbed the velvet case inside his pocket. His Uncle Amish had just sent it up from Watford. He hadn't opened it yet, waiting to

get home with the perfect light. He could only imagine Anna's reaction.

The last block was dim. Incandescent street lamps flickered with a queer rhythm and Rowan noticed the windows lacked light. The snow was falling hard, peppering his face with the icy pinpricks. Weary, Rowan teetered on the curb, avoiding the hidden spaces concealed by shrubbery and stone hedge. Shadows crawled from the nooks of bins and lampposts, one taking human form. He felt the eyes of a nearby shape. He could feel it leering at him as he passed through the streetlamp's snow-globe light.

"Can you spare a copper?"

Rowan ignored the voice.

"A copper for a man down on his luck."

Unable to resist, he glanced over. He was a boy, maybe twenty, dressed in the moth tattered rags of the Sally Army. A shivering hand reached out with a dented cup, a lone coin rattling around pathetically. Something was different about the boy. An immigrant maybe, the city was full of them, come in from one of Britain's commonwealth's to carve out a living. He'd olive skin, India, Madagascar, Indonesia maybe. But his accent was remarkably European. Coughing erupted from his wet interior, tuberculosis or worse.

"Where you from boy?" Rowan asked.

"Name's Erik... not sure where I'm from," he replied meekly, his cup still rattling its miserable coin. An amnesiac, clocked by a sliding rack in the mills or the like.

"You Balkan, a Romany?"

The boy shook his head.

A gust threw a drift of snow into them both. Erik withdrew his cup and tucked his chin into his

coat's shabby collar. Rowan looked around, no life except the skinny blur of a stray cat making for the shelter of an overturned bin. He reached in his coat pocket for penny. Again, the cup emerged from the boy's rag coat, but Rowan held fast to the coin, hovering his clenched fist over the cup. A disquieted smile urged him to give up his charity.

"I can't give this to you brother," Rowan said at last.

"Some cruel joke? Sir, mercy."

"No joke, lad."

Rowan noticed something peculiar, a growing stain around the lad's collar from ear to ear. The light was bad, but he noticed the urchin's neck was leaking like a syrup cap off its seat, blood everywhere. A moat of dark crimson pooled around his knees, the snow ghoulish white against the cherry red.

"Your neck." Rowan grabbed the boy's chin and turned his head. It was a wound as thick as his thumb and stapled together. He jerked away, his winter gloves greasy with fluid. "Who did this to you?"

The boy shook his head. "I don't know... sir, please, the coin."

"No lad!" he said, not exactly certain why. Then like a shot, he realized who'd sliced the boy's neck ear to ear. Like instinct, Rowan knew who'd inflicted this grievous wound. He grew calm, a fleeting sense of peace.

"Why not?" The boy moaned.

"You're not real, Erik Bahuus. You're not supposed to be here, some wretch on a cold Mancurian street. This isn't your place," Rowan explained, calmly shaking his head. "I'm sorry but

I've got to go. I can't stay any longer. There's nothing left in this world for you or me. My time's quickly approaching."

Rowan stood and continued to walk. Desperate gurgling sounds followed him. But after a block, the noise disappeared, muted by the wispy patter of snowflakes.

#

Kristjana and Manus stood back, letting Rowan's fit take its course. Minutes passed. The spasm ceased with the cooling of his cranial circuitry. Curled up like a torched beetle, Rowan pulled himself upright. He wiped the coagulated crust from his nose and prodded his leathery eyes to focus. His mind felt damaged, reworked by a chemical catalyst but clear, like storm clouds burning away to reveal blue sky. He looked at Manus and Kristjana, his mouth contorted in empty gasps.

"What's gotten into him?"

"-Sabotage," Manus replied, hand on holster.

"It's like he's melting from the inside or something."

"He's trying to speak."

"Give him a minute."

Unpolluted by the Skjærsild's corrupt influence, he felt free. There was nothing left to hold onto anymore. His throat felt loose, wet and unleashed. Rowan reached for Kristjana's cross, resting on the bronzed flesh of her clavicle. Startled, she pulled away.

"I'll tell you what I know," Rowan said at last.

Kristjana nodded, surprised. "Go ahead, Rowan."

He told them of his time in Midgard, leaving out the details like his affair with Ragna. Kristjana sat and listened, busily entering data into her

handheld console while Manus switched on an audio recorder. Ytter-Midgard piqued their interest. They were especially keen on partisan tactics, suicide missions, the Surtur enclave bombings and stories he'd heard about checkpoint ambushes.

"His mind's ancient, less malleable, not as indoctrinated as the rest. I wonder why they even bothered," Manus said.

"Do you think the 'Dispatch made it through?" Kristjana asked.

"I don't know." Manus turned back to Rowan. "What else do you know about the Mindre infiltration?"

Rowan told them about Kdt. Rolig's attempt to kill Sigurd, the technical sabotage and Engel's betrayal.

"The assassination bid makes sense. By the sounds of it, Sigurd Asperheim is a cruel bastard," Manus ruminated. "I can see the insurgency recruiting skraeling double agents. But reprogramming hardware like this Engelfrigg creature, and for our benefit no less -The insurgents have bigger problems. It just doesn't add."

"-Regardless, we don't have current technical intelligence on the Tyrians, definitely nothing useful enough to rework such state-of-the-art weaponry. The 'Dispatch kernel was just basic field manuals, how to rig explosives, build weapons and infiltrate, that sort of thing."

"-There's also the bundled 'history lesson', don't forget-"

"-Not likely to bring down a troop transport. Maybe the uprising's advanced more than we know."

"Dispatch?" Rowan murmured, confused.

"The colony decided to try to support the Mindre Uprising." Kristjana explained to him. "We established a low-gain connection with insurgent leaders, but it was too slow for heavy data loads. We needed a high gain hub-"

The Lahg 17 Event, Rowan remembered Einar's crude footage from Bifrost, the snippet of the dying Islander.

"-Our arrays were jammed. So we dispatched a reconnaissance team behind enemy lines to seize a hub and introduce a clan-encrypted message to the transmission buffer. It was a message on time release, able to broadcast at random like scattershot and undetectable by the enemy. The uprising could then confiscate a copy of the 'Dispatch through infiltration. That was the plan at least-" Kristjana continued.

"-The Torstein Dispatch?" Rowan blurted.

Cpt. Manus looked worried. He un-holstered his weapon and pushed the barrel into Rowan's head. "Torstein? How in hell does he know that, Lt. Gunnar? Something's not right. He's a plant, a senior commander just miraculously appearing in our custody. It makes no sense!" Sweat beaded on Manus' forehead, neck veins pulsing. Kristjana tried to calm him.

"He told us everything," Kristjana replied. "He's a trove of intelligence."

"It could all be made up," Manus lamented. "What if he's a mole?"

"Impossible, too much of it checks out."

The secrets encrypted on the recovered data crystal were, in fact, the Islander's transmission they'd so desperately tried to send. That dark night in the warrens of Ytter-Midgard, Rowan had stolen it away from the Mindre insurgent. They'd

used Vidar's great uncle Torstein's clan key to encrypt it, for whatever reason. The Islanders wanted to defeat the Ny Æsiri on Earth, so they sent them the only aid they could, information. Whatever they'd bundled in that message was more than just army training manuals. It was something more volatile, a political weapon. Vidar, keeper of his uncle's clan encryption key, would surely know by now. But Vidar was Ny Æsiri with mixed loyalties. Rowan decided to say no more.

#

Blindfolded, they shuffled him into an underground labyrinth used to move troops and ammunition. Rowan's optics easily cut through the blindfold, but he played along. The Islanders had found him an ad-hoc cell, a small chapel. The ceilings were low and the pews spartan, just large enough to accommodate a handful of soldiers. But it was a house of God, and Rowan took comfort in the familiarity of tattered hymnbooks and the chapel's simple wooden cross.

A young private guarded the door, maybe eighteen or nineteen. Rowan wanted to smile but feared his rot-metal teeth would do nothing but antagonize. Praying felt pointless. He tried to converse with the Almighty, but his words came up short. In a few days he'd slip into coma, stasis in maintenance mode until the trickle of Muspel condensate dried. There'd be no turning back. The cellemaskin would degenerate, and his mind would short irreparably, forever. Fear of death was paradox.

Kristjana stepped in.

"Hello," he said hoarsely. The humidity had loosened his vocal modulator, more human now.

"I need to ask you a question," she said, sitting next to him. "The Torstein encryption key, are the Tyrians in possession of it?"

"I don't think so," he lied.

"The Torstein Dispatch relies on clan loyalists, we're hoping for a few Ny Æsiri sympathizers," Kristjana explained.

"Torstein was just a rumor among Sigurd's varmsoldat, something about a Vanir communiqué. I overheard them discussing it," he lied, again. "Can I ask you a question about the Islanders?" He was trying to change the subject.

"Depends on the question."

He paused, "-How'd you all get here?"

"The Islanders?"

Rowan nodded.

"My history's a bit uneven-"

"-I don't care," Rowan lamented. "I just want some sense of the past, any of it."

"Alright -okay." She paused to think then spoke. "All of us are the descendants of Norsk-statoil, Surtur fuel scientists from Island, or Iceland in the Wester-Anglo tongue. Many of us ethnic Islanders left Earth from Polynesia over two centuries ago to-" Kristjana started.

"-Excuse me, lass," he said apologetically. "The mind's a bit rotten. Death's not been kind to it - But you said you were from Polynesia?"

She nodded. "Yes, the Heimdall archipelago, Bifrost specifically-"

"What about your eyes -hair -skin -not a swarthy fleck anywhere-"

"Our ancestors were an Æsiri minority. In the post-industrial shock, Scandinavia grew unlivable, nothing but an immense ice sheet. Norsk-statoil relocated to Polynesia where they inherited a

European launch facility and the undersea thermal vents. Norsk-statoil inter-married with the local populations, but Islanders, for whatever reason, did not -religion -culture -too much time has passed to know for sure. Heimdall was an oasis, our tropical Babylon. -Then off-world surveyors discovered vast geothermal reserves on Tharses Montes and a colonial expedition was launched."

Rowan tried to take in the millennia of history he'd missed. His Ny Æsiri handlers had seen fit not to mention any of this to him. Maybe they couldn't, too indoctrinated by their own dogma. He refrained from asking the hundreds of questions that screamed to be answered. Time was limited, and he wanted to separate the wheat from the chaff and get to the point. He sat quietly and listened to Kristjana as she summed up the past thousand years the best she could.

"Povinis Mons and Tharses Montes had once been a territory of the Ny Æsiri. Under clan rule, the Asgard Islanders established autonomy and democratically managed their day-to-day affairs. A few hundred multiplied into thousands. Our predecessors built the 'arcologies', underground hyper-structures that transformed the colony into an autarchic city-state, completely self-contained, independent from our terrestrial masters."

Kristjana paused for a moment, sullen and romantic for the long gone Halcyon Days she never knew. From what Rowan could tell, people at one time traveled between Bifrost and Asgard with ease. All of this strange space faring seemed a fairy-tale, far-flung and surreal to Rowan's fossilized status quo.

"Greed betrayed them as the Stillehavet's volcanic resources dwindled," she continued. "There'd been a rumor that the Tyrians intended to take over Asgard, steal the Islander's energy and expand. Their current rate of terrestrial consumption was no longer sustainable.

"The Islanders cast a vote to succeed. It was about the same time Ny Æsiri nationalist overthrew Midgard and dissolved clan rule in order to establish the Congress of Tyr, disenfranchising Vidar's uncle Torstein in the upheaval. The new moguls were not as lenient with their off-world holdings. Ny Æsiri loyalists on Asgard were ordered to seize control of the Islander arcologies, establish marshal law, and appoint a viceroy.

"A battle broke out and the loyalists retreated to the launch facility, now the Bifrost terminus-", Kristjana explained.

"-Valhalla?"

Kristjana nodded. "-They held out against Islander paramilitaries for a time, converting the blast curtain into a fortress. The siege didn't last. After a few months, they went anoxic and perished."

"The 1st Wave," Rowan muttered.

"Excuse me?"

"We -I mean, the Einherjar, referred to them as Ragnarok's mythic 1st Wave."

"-And you're the 3rd Wave, right? We know." Kristjana continued. "On Earth, the Midgard annexation wars erupted, a colonial expansion into Jotenheim resulting in the subjugation of its surviving aboriginals, the Mindre Æsiri. The battle consolidated Ytter-Midgard into Midgard

after a protracted conflict. -Midgard itself was once a colony of Norsk-statoil-"

"-What was 'Norsk-statoil'?" Rowan asked, stopping her.

"A Norwegian oil company at the peak of the Western-Angle Empires, a neo-feudal entity." Kristjana smirked, then continued. "The Tyrians established Skjærsild, a subsidiary tasked with the duty of reanimating the conflict's fatalities, giving birth to the undead Einherjar. The dysterfolk, as they're called, were trained as an army and sent to seize the Tharsis Montes launch facility." Rowan remembered the derelict spacecraft hangars below Valhalla, nothing but scrap. The 2nd Wave undead were never intended to leave Asgard and neither were the 3rd Wave.

"By retrofitting the makeshift fortress, the 2nd Wave created the impenetrable Valhalla, a sheet of iron. The bulwark bought the 2nd Wave time to mine a few shallow thermal wells. But they were energy-weak and prone to enfeeblement. Each offensive quickly depleted their reserves, until both sides reached a grinding stalemate lasting almost a century," Kristjana explained.

Then came the new offensive, Sigurd's 3rd Wave with Rowan in tow.

"-But the Earth's freezing, Fimbulwinter's never-ending winter. The Stillehavet's vents are fading. The Æsiri are up against the wall; they've no choice. The Earth will soon be iced over, and they've nowhere to go-" Rowan tried to offer perspective.

"-Is that what they told you?"

Rowan nodded.

"It's rubbish."

"The encroaching glaciers, the sea ice, -I saw it with my own eyes-"

"-Yes, but your eyes deceived you. They did not tell you the whole story."

"-But, Sverre said-"

Kristjana shook her head.

Silence turned into minutes. Rowan said nothing, resigned to idly thumbing through a hymnbook. He'd had enough history for now. Kristjana gazed at him quietly, her alpine-blue eyes wide and resonant. He felt ashamed, wretched, and diseased. It was hard to sit next to her, so beautiful.

"This isn't me," he mumbled. "I'm not this... thing, this ad-hoc Skjærsild ogre. They played on my vanity, and I was weak."

"I know," she said.

"Now, I don't even think I'm Christian."

"I don't understand."

"When I died, I believed my soul would be with the Lord in the Kingdom of Heaven, eternal life, forgiven of my sins," Rowan explained. His synapses heated, the skull warmth drawing tears from the gummy mucous in his eyes. "When they woke me, I thought I was in Hell, heartache as my afterlife, angels turned into demons. I'd become a horror, but pride overshadowed judgment. -I," he stuttered. "-I actually thought I was helping." Rowan flashed her a desperate smile.

"Christ will shepherd you when he's ready."

Rowan shook his head violently. "I've sat here for hours and nothing. I'm soulless. This flesh won't let me believe-" Rowan lifted his arms to display himself. "-It's a shell, a doppelganger. They told me I'd be saving the world... I just hung on so bloody long. They promised so much, redemption, a new life beyond this husk."

Kristjana stroked his arm in awkward comfort.

"-I should've listened to myself. It wasn't Hell but Purgatory, with me some wretched zombie from the underworld -a skraeling. I never wanted to end up like this."

"Rowan... no." She reached for his shoulder. "Listen to me. Just tell us what you know about our enemy, about Sigurd, his tactics, planning, strengths and weaknesses. Leave a legacy. The Lord's brought you to us and that in itself is a miracle."

Sigurd leaned back and gazed at the Chaplain's altar, the wooden cross behind it. After a few minutes he looked back at Kristjana then nodded.

#

Crescent skull fragments sat on the tray next to him. Discolored, the bone dripped gray detritus staining the sterile fabric beneath. Jonas, tasked with reverse engineering Skjærsild's dark art, fed a nest of wires into Rowan's brain. Beeps and flashes activated with every twitch of his ruined forearm, strapped and clamped for vivisection. The Islanders were looking for something to exploit, a way to seize the dysterfolk nervous system and incapacitate the Einherjar. Rowan obliged.

Jonas spoke into his audio recorder, documenting the procedure. "Subject: Rowan A. Guthrie, 3rd Wave uber-kommandant, Lifthrasir Corp. Initial signal stimulus demonstrates self-organizing cellular network, extremely adaptive. Bio-necrotic transmogrification shows parasitic infiltration and duplication of the neural networks. Grievous damage bypassed via redundancy, hydraulic emulsion known as 'svartblod' shows tamper-proof encryption scheme. Vast improvements over previous technology -They made you a damn juggernaut," he said,

exasperated. He clicked off his recorder and wired up a test probe then inserted it into Rowan's cranium.

"A regular Rasputin" Rowan cracked. "Aren't I...-aren't I... -aren't I... -aren't I... -aren't I... -aren't I..."

"-Sorry, Rowan." Jonas reached over and unplugged the probe. Rowan's face contorted in seizure. "I promise that won't happen again."

Rowan shook his head dismissively, the glitch gone.

"I've reworked your reservoirs. It should keep you going a couple more days."

"Thank you," Rowan said.

They'd setup a projection system in the lab. Rowan toggled a handheld device, flipping through the photographs of the Islander arcologies while Jonas worked. Their gardens mesmerized him, enclosed by domes carved from the basalt of Povinis Mons. They'd recreated ancient microcosms, miniature Edens the size of parade grounds. There were forests from the ancient world, Japanese maples, Boreal spruce and Amazonian mahogany. Jonas called it silvaculture, tree farming used to process soils and microbial nutrients for sustainability. A few hardwoods were dedicated to religious objects, but most were left to thrive, some even a century old.

Prior to the colonization and conquest of Jotenheim's coasts, Norsk-statoil had launched an expedition to the Svalbard, an ancient archipelago in the forgotten Norse homeland. Their archives spoke of vaults buried thousands of feet under the ice, containing the lost flora thought vanished. Glasere-divers penetrated the ice mantle and recovered the trove. Colonists stowed seed samples

aboard their longships and grew them in their newly built greenhouses. Full spectrum amplifiers nourished the chambers with sunlight and the forests flourished. They had even managed to establish fauna, small roe deer, wild rabbit, and a Polynesian aviary -creatures hardy enough to survive the climactic shift.

"It's like a living museum."

"What's that?" Jonas said, busy with analysis.

"The Earth, frozen forever... This'll be all that's left."

"Forever?" Jonas mused. "Not quite. Everything is just remnants of the Torstein Inflection. The Earth's climate will soon rebound, and we'll be able return."

"-Of the Torstein Dispatch?" Rowan asked, innocently. "One and the same?"

"In a way... Dr. Amundsen was a climatologist. He used to visit Povonis Mons often. He was a champion of Islander independence and our chief emissary to Ny Midgard, very active in clan politicking and a hell of a scientist. He theorized the 'Inflection climactic theory, mathematically modeling the complicated tumult of the post-industrial climate-"

"-Post-industrial-" Rowan repeated.

"-When the Western-Angle Empire fell, industrial progress offset the atmosphere's chemical balance. There was a warming 'shock' that prompted the polar caps' latent heat to absorb the excess thermal capacity. It created an inflection, shutting down ocean currents and activating others. Weather cycles increased in the northern latitude, producing snow and ice, creating a runaway ice age."

"-Fimbulwinter-"

"-Torstein theorized it to be only transitory. With humanity's near extinction and our reliance on geothermal, the warming would be minimal post-inflection. The Earth would warm again and hopefully return to equilibrium. In fact, it's already begun," Jonas explained.

"How many died?"

"During the 'Shock?" Jonas shrugged. Rowan nodded. "Most, I suppose. Failed crops led to starvation and epidemic. The severe fluctuations of hot and cold got the rest. It took some time, a few centuries."

Jonas said it so quickly, the age of blight and famine nothing but a footnote. He saw friends and family, thin leathery skeletons, wandering the world in the Dance Macabre. The land had had enough of humankind and its self-destructive preoccupations. In his absence, the Four Horsemen had been unleashed to quell humanity's hubris, extinguishing its flickering flame beneath a blackened sky of its own creation. And Rowan, asleep beneath the storm, had escaped the hurricane of plagues and tribulation.

"Fimbulwinter's temporary? What if Torstein Amundsen's wrong?"

"Then he's wrong, however unlikely. We've archives of data to prove he isn't. And Tyrian nationalists have no evidence to the contrary, just propaganda. His science went against subsidiary interests and exposed their jingoism. So they silenced him. We believe the threat of his 'climactic inflection' theory ignited the Tyrian coup that dissolved the clans," Jonas said.

"That's why you used his clan encryption. It was a sign to those 'in the know'."

Jonas nodded.

"Do you believe his progeny would be sympathetic and help the cause, help the insurgency overthrow the Tyrian regime?"

"Perhaps. We don't know much of Torstein's living ancestors, but it was our only option. Clan keys are heirlooms, closely guarded antiques. History's truths are the most important weapon a people have against their oppressors, a way to get out from under their master's boot heel. We had to be careful," Jonas said.

"And you believe that?"

"It's absolutely true! Along with the insurgent field manuals, we included Torstein's legacy work, his entire climatological treatise on the 'Inflection. I call it the 'history lesson', a slice of the truth that invalidates the Tyrian junta, a weapon more damaging than a freighter of rifles and bombs."

Rowan was hesitant to divulge anything. He'd carried the Torstein Dispatch around his neck for a year or more, oblivious. It'd been his secret, something he was able to control. But then he'd just gone and handed it to Torstein Amundsen's grandnephew, Vidar. It looked very bad, considering Vidar was a member of Skjærsild, a subsidiary responsible for building the very weapon system employed against the Islanders. They wouldn't understand Vidar, not the way Rowan knew him. He decided to say nothing.

Flipping through the photos of the underground arcology, he saw images of communal living spaces filled with families, neatly arranged in efficient Scandinavian fashion. Ny Midgard was its opposite, full of huge bustling subsidiaries and unbridled commerce.

Ny Æsiri propaganda, grafted to the minds of the unquestioning living, carried over into the realm of the dysterfolk. It was a tedious bulwark of religion, prophecy and brutality, molding instinct from indoctrination. Kuld-soldat lacked chutzpah, ingenuity and fraternity but made up for it in uncanny lethality. Like birds of prey, once hatched, they dumbly went about the business of killing. But with Rowan, Skjærsild needed a different approach. He wasn't of the Ny Æsiri, and they'd gone to great lengths to tune him into an Einherjar. He could feel it in his cadaver, a river of Ny Æsiri manipulation.

Rowan flipped through more pictures until he arrived at the last photo. It was a man, a Ny Æsiri by the looks of him -olive skin, silvered hair, soft wrinkles and a wispy beard framing a hearty smile. There was a kindness in his pale blue eyes.

"Torstein Amundsen?"

Jonas nodded. Rowan saw his grand nephew's resemblance.

"Rowan, I'm going to try something," Jonas said.

Rowan's eye's crossed as the needle-probes were removed from his jellyfish cerebrum. Like a mechanic, Jonas wiped the skull segment clean and bolted back into place. He then loaded a cartridge into an unwieldy air gun and attached it to one of Rowan's chest spigots. "Cesium 137, a radio-nuclide that'll map your metabolic circuitry."

Rowan shrugged.

There was a hiss from a nearby machine then a whack from the gun. His tongue wiggled fishlike, ears throbbing with a broken squeal as the dopant surged into his svartblod pathways. Rowan tried to focus on Torstein's warm smile, but darkness

swelled in his periphery. Arcoma drifted just out of reach, replaced by low-level delirium.

Then nothing.

[TD] CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

When he arrived home, the snow had subsided. He opened the gate and looked back at the empty street. Below a crown of clay chimneys, a small gabled window was lit, its curtain pulled aside to reveal a sliver of light. She was home. He wasn't a peeping Tom, least not in the perverted sense, just a casual observer of his community, and she was an eyeful. Rowan leaned down, dusted off the evening paper and checked the Royal Mail.

The clock ticked in time with the parlor rocking chair. Emily was up, listening to Lionel Monckton on her crackly gramophone. Rowan said hello, but "Our Miss Gibbs" tinny reverberations muted him. He stopped by the icebox and carved off an end of salami then grabbed some bread and a slab of Cheshire before retiring upstairs. He turned on his desk lamp and reclined in the velvet of his Baroque armchair, idly flipping through the paper as he wrestled a piece of flaky sandwich to his mouth.

Wiping his hands on the tablecloth, he pulled the case from his pocket. The ring was beautiful, light captured in complicated shards that danced over the box's satin lid. He squinted, picturing the jeweled band on Anna's finger. Closing his eyes he saw her, his June bride in a tea garden, ready to be his forever. Then thoughts clouded with rumors of war. They'd recruit him into the officer's academy soon. Then he'd be off on the troop frigate to Calais. Rowan tried not to think about it.

He finished the cold cuts, thumbed through the Manchester Evening News then switched off his desk lamp. Downstairs the widow Emily had drifted off in her rocker. No sound from the stairwell but the click of the gramophone needle knocking into turntable wheel. Everything was dark, the snow's pale blue filling the ceiling with cold light. Rowan shut his eyes for a moment.

When he opened them he noticed the candle-yellow glow from across the street. Grabbing his tumbler of Johnny Walker, Rowan walked over and pulled the curtain aside. The light cast long shadows onto the snowy cobbles. Rubbing his eyes, he peered out with discretion. She was there, her back turned to the window, a motionless silhouette hovering in the shadow play. He'd casually observed her for months but something was odd, out of place. He couldn't help but stare. The parlor clock chimed seven. It was getting late.

Some vague impetus compelled him downstairs to put his slickers on. He threw on his mackinaw, buttoned it up and crept out the door, careful not wake his slumbering proprietor. Rowan tucked into the stoop's snow-heavy honeysuckle and waited. A minute passed. Nothing. She was there, the candlelight dancing behind her, still like a mannequin. Rowan didn't know her name, but that was part of the exotic mystery, a girl from some far-flung end of the earth he'd never visit. He wanted to know her, know how she'd arrived in this dilapidated district of Manchester's industrial dregs.

"Hello?" Rowan said, knocking on the front door of the row house.

The ground floor lights were off. No one answered. He knocked again. A jiggle of the door

latch revealed it to be unlocked. Taking a deep breath, he pushed on the door. Rich incense greeted him, the entry hall full of tribal artifacts and stone idols.

Crowding the rail, he inched up the narrow stairwell, careful to avoid creaks. The bedroom door was ajar, the candlelight shimmering beyond. He said a hello, again there was no response. It was almost civic duty now, looking out for the welfare of the city's citizens and such. This girl could be suffering from heart troubles or influenza. He wiggled his fingers around the door edge and opened it. Inside, the room was bare except the wavering flames of a wicker torch and the woman, a Tahitian belle from the South Pacific. Kneeling on a grass mat, she sat as if in a trance. Rowan looked around. There was no bed, no writing desk, nothing. What was this beautiful exotic girl doing in this English climate?

"Lass, you'll catch you death of pneumonia," he said. He pulled off his mackinaw and awkwardly set it over her shoulders. She didn't flinch, her eyes focused blankly on the smoky light, like she was under a witch doctor's spell.

"Come out of it, love." Rowan snapped his fingers without a blink.

Pulling out a Pall Mall, he lit the fag and kneeled down to look into her eyes. Hazel emptiness gazed back, her soul lacking its notional third dimension. Hand waving did nothing. She remained statuesque, not even a twitch. Rowan engaged her in a one-sided conversation, but she replied without a sigh. Hesitant at first, he reached for her clasped hands.

He recoiled, her flesh as cold as roof-eve icicles. Was she dead? He gripped her dainty

wrist, searching for a faint pulse. Nothing. He removed his pocket watch and opened the clasp then held the crystal face under her nose. No mist, she wasn't breathing.

"My God," he whispered.

It was like someone had posed her, a grotesquery. He yelled over his shoulder for help, but no one came. He grabbed her and shook her, but she was rigid and reactive.

"Who did this?"

He gazed on, this beautiful girl held in a zombie trance. Maybe some poison had slowed her heart. Fascinated he continued to stare, smoking his cigarette to the quick. Then her eyes slowly closed and opened. Rowan rubbed his own, thinking it a dream, but he didn't wake. She whispered something. Straining to hear, he leaned closer.

"I'm not here," she said slowly.

"Damn true, lass."

"I'm not supposed to be here, but you already knew that. There are no more ghosts, Rowan Aidan Guthrie. There's no more you and me. It's ending... the world. Look outside. It's dying. Alive or dead, there's only moments, brief snippets of memory. That's all that's left of you. That's all there ever was," she said, her monotone drawl tumbling from limp lips. "You should leave."

Rowan stood up and stumbled back a few steps, tears streamed down his cheek. He made for the door, shuffled downstairs and headed back across the street, leaving his mackinaw behind.

#

Kristjana -as a favor- promised him a visit to the Islander arcologies. To see a forest before oblivion, no matter how small, was a gift for which he was grateful. The Islanders didn't have

to do to this. Rowan was a war prisoner and deserving of no luxury. But he'd committed treason for their benefit and divulged covert information about the 3rd Wave kuld-soldat, compromising Sigurd's legions. As Kristjana said, it was the least they could do for him. They'd grown partial to his stories about the ancient world, a fragmented universe he soon realized he understood less and less.

A sandstorm forced them to bivouac in one of the many cisterns dotting the Povinis escarpment. Water, piped through underground channels, pooled into airtight reservoirs that supplied the Islander's bunker network. There was a small airlock adjoining the water-filled room where soldiers could remove gear and replenish. It was cold and damp, but a welcome respite from the gritty airless desert above.

Kristjana was tucked fetal on the metal grate. The sluice's water trickle had lulled her into slumber, and she was tired from the march. She'd chained him to a rail, more protocol than pragmatism. Rowan didn't mind. It'd all be over soon. Regardless, he took no offense. The dripping water soothed his frayed synapses, cooling his mind and preserving what Muspel remained.

Rowan gazed at his reflection. Water swelled his fingertips as he stirred the dark pool below. His right-eye's chromatic filter was damaged, but by squinting, he was able to shift into infrared. It'd been months since he'd looked at himself. Asgard had done its worst. He was a monster, black frogfish eyes, a hairless scalp, half-torn and rubbery skin that bulged with fluid. With his scattered memory, his face had been lost in the dream ocean of dysterfolk consciousness. He no

longer recognized himself. Pouring the liquid over his head, slicks of svartblod stained the surface.

He smirked.

The notion that Vidar, through his wizardry, may've been able to reconstitute him into a living man was laughable. It just showed how moldy his head had gotten to believe such farce. Skjærsild intended for him to never come back from Asgard, and they were going to get their wish.

"I can remove them, if you want."

He nodded.

Kristjana had awoken from her nap and noticed Rowan struggling with his chains. She hit a remote, and the neck bracket released.

"How long do the storms last?"

"If they're planet-wide... up to a month," Kristjana said, coughing. "It'll give our forces time to re-plan. Sigurd made quite a beachhead, but his position won't last. We've a new weapon."

"I know. I saw the mushroom cloud a few days ago. It took out a chief lieutenant."

Kristjana nodded. The Islanders had developed a kiloton device like the one used to liquidate Grov's position. A significant nugget of intelligence that'd slipped through Uber-Kdt. Olst's anemic reconnaissance. The emaciated 2nd Wave had never been a threat to the Islander frontline. There'd been no reason to deploy such awesome weaponry until the 3rd Wave arrived.

She checked her interlink for the weather report. Einn Command predicted the heavy dust would begin to dissipate within the day. Then they could leave. Pulling a small Bible from her kit, she thumbed through it, skimming passages she'd outlined the night previously. He asked her to read one of the Psalms and she obliged.

"He maketh wars to cease in all the world: he breaketh the bow... and burneth the chariots in the fire. I will be exalted among the heathen, and I will be exalted in the earth, The Lord of hosts is with us..."

"Exalted among the heathen," Rowan repeated. "...exalted among the pagan more like it, The Holy Roman Empire encircled by barbarians."

"What do you mean, The 'Holy Roman Empire'?"

"Your people, Povinis Mons, the Islanders, the last vestige of Christendom."

"This isn't a religious war, Rowan, despite what you may've heard. A war of Ny Æsiri colonial conquest maybe, but Christ cares little about our wars. Our fate is our own. He can only weep for us," Kristjana said, wiping her nose with gauze.

"How'd it get this way? Norse paganism, right out of nowhere-"

"-Not from out of nowhere. Torstein Amundsen once said, and I'm paraphrasing, kleptocracy can only sustain itself if a religious ideology can be established to justify it," she quoted. "All invasions are land grabs."

Kristjana reached down and filled a canteen with the cistern's water. Rowan apologized and warned her to avoid the aftermath of his small bath, hovering like an oil slick. She shrugged, caring little. Clearing her throat with a cough, she continued.

"How'd the Tyrians get so zealous?"

"When Norsk-statoil brought its energy infrastructure to Polynesia, they also brought the Prose Edda. The natives took to the ancient mythology like fish to water, embracing the pantheon and Fimbulwinter. Heimdall ancients spoke of the banished white god, Con Tiqui Viracocha,

who would return from the east to lead them to salvation. Isolated from the industrial world for centuries, they believed the Norsk-statoil Scandinavians were Viracocha's descendants. The Norsk-statoil enclave intermarried, building religious union with the Prose Edda and the Con Tiqui mythos," Kristjana explained. She sniffled and coughed, eyes red with irritation.

"Is the dust bothering you?" Rowan asked, interrupting her story.

Kristjana shook her head. "No. It's like a tickling in the back of the throat, just sore. I'll be okay."

Rowan continued. "So paganism was pragmatic and prophetic. But what about your people?"

"Every civilization has its minorities. My Lutheran ancestors were tolerated. For centuries everyone lived in harmony without sectarian strife. Some native Pure Æsiri even converted to Christianity," Kristjana said, wistful.

"Then what happened?"

"The invasion of Jotenheim, -Heimdall's thermal vents were receding. New undersea exhaust systems were exploited in the eastern Stillehavet, and the Æsiri colonized the jagged coast of the New World's southern continent. Mostly icecap, Midgard didn't have much land. An easy migration except the fjords were already populated-"

"...with the Mindre-"

Kristjana nodded. "-The colony grew energy fat, and they consumed recklessly. The Ny Æsiri varmsoldat subjugated the Mindre to expand the city-state. Always wanting, it was an insidious nationalism born from hybridized Æsiri myth that encouraged conquest, some self-righteous nonsense

about Viracocha returning to punish the true descendants of the gods that'd exiled him."

"I saw the priests in Ny Midgard self-flagellating, a lament for Con Tiqui's betrayal," Rowan added.

"The dark ritual of the Ny Æsiri righteous, unfortunately it's the Mindre taking the brunt of Viracocha's revenge not the immigrant priests. Rumors of Ragnarok, the final battle, spread. It took on a life all its own and never stopped. It was the tipping point that allowed the Tyrians to seize power and justify their savagery." Kristjana coughed again. She looked sick. Her eyes were swollen and puffy.

"Are you feeling well?"

"Not sure. It started this morning. Must've been something I ate"

"Do you have any analgesics, syrups, tea?" Rowan asked.

Kristjana shook her head like she'd never heard of such things. She coughed again then motioned him away. Rowan looked around the cistern. Cold light filtered through a roof lens. It was quiet, the distant thunder of artillery absorbed by Asgard's thick mantle. Valhalla and Sigurd felt worlds away. For a moment he'd almost forgotten.

Rowan shifted his shielding. He wanted to get rid of it but like a tortoise shell, he couldn't. The Skjærsild technicians were adamant it was not to be removed. The near vacuum would distend his ribcage and rupture his abdominal walls. Eventually his guts would herniate and svartblod would hemorrhage into his legs. The cinched armor was all that kept him together. He'd scratched away the blue diamond insignia and torn his name

and rank from the armor. He was a soldier of no army any longer.

"I need to tell you something, Kristjana. I wasn't entirely truthful before."

She looked at him, wearily.

"I came across the Torstein Dispatch in Ytter-Midgard. I hadn't a clue what it was. It was right before Sigurd shot the Mindre insurgent. The partisan dropped a data crystal, and I picked it up. No one noticed and I kept it," Rowan explained. "I didn't know how your people would react-"

"-Rowan," she said. "What did you do with it?"

"I gave it to someone."

"Whom did you give it to?" Her were eyes serious and focused.

"I had my Skjærsild technician analyze it. He noticed the clan key encryption and the name, Torstein Amundsen. We couldn't read it, so he told me to hang onto it as a souvenir. So I did."

"Is that all? You said you gave it to someone else."

"A Skjærsild research scientist on Forst Fodt-"

"The Tyrians? Rowan! Say you didn't-"

"-His name was Vidar Amundsen, the grand nephew of Torstein Amundsen," Rowan blurted.

Kristjana mouthed words, speechless. She leaned against the concrete wall, saying nothing. Rowan lacked the wherewithal to read facial expression, but he knew whatever he'd just said, resonated.

"Do the Tyrians know this Vidar has it?" she asked.

"I doubt it. Vidar's very sensitive to that kind of thing."

"Does he have the Amundsen's clan key?"

"He didn't say."

"-And is he sympathetic to the Mindre Æsiri insurgency? Would he help overthrow the Tyrians?" Kristjana asked.

"I don't know." Rowan was exasperated. "He'd great respect for his uncle, knew his theories and political history, but my empathy's shot. -I can say this, he'd a definite wistful respect for his uncle," Rowan replied.

"Respect?"

"-An affection for his uncle's principles."

"So he'd help us? Rowan, do you realize what you've done?" He shook his head. "You've executed our plan! You've unwittingly delivered the Torstein Dispatch!" Kristjana said, elated.

"-I didn't say he'd help your cause, Kristjana. The Tyrians have afforded him luxury and freedom. He's a bio-necroticist, a defense builder. He designs kuld-soldat weapons of war, not exactly a subversive. It'll take an iron will for him to sacrifice all that for his uncle's legacy."

"-But a sacrifice for the greater good."

"-Kristjana, I'm not going to give you false hope. He's a good man, and he knows his great uncle better than you or I, but you can't expect too much-"

"-And why not?"

"People let you down. They have to look out for themselves. It's human nature. Vidar's kind and thoughtful, but every man has limits. He'd be putting his life in danger if he dissented. People aren't always as strong as you need them to be."

"You've got to have faith Rowan. I don't know who hurt you so to give you such a dim view of humanity, but courage comes from the heart. If your heart is strong, you'll do the right thing," Kristjana said, reaching out to hold his hand.

"My heart hasn't beat in over a thousand years," Rowan smirked.

"It was a message in a bottle, a one in a thousand chance the Torstein Dispatch would reach someone like Vidar, a family member with access to a clan key. -And rarer still, he's someone who understands the treatise science. It's a miracle! You were our unknowing agent, a godsend! If the Mindre gain a political foothold in Ny Midgard, the Tyrian regime will dissolve."

"But Vidar's a patriot, Kristjana. He won't bite the hand that feeds-"

"-He's a patriot -sure- but not a nationalist. You've made that much clear, and that makes all the difference."

"I haven't a clue what Vidar may or may not do."

"It's hope Rowan, and that's what we need the most. Time will tell."

"Hope." Rowan shook his head, uncomfortable with the word.

Kristjana stood up and packed the rest of her small kit. She handed Rowan his walking chains, which he fastened to his ankles and wrists. She checked her handheld console. Islander weather reports showed the dust lifting with visibility improving.

"Speaking of time. You don't have much of it left. We need to hurry."

She opened the airlock and climbed into her oversized shielding. It was cumbersome, like a suit of ballooned medieval plate-mail. Surprisingly, every twist and bend of the body conformed perfectly to the suit, lightweight and maneuverable. Kristjana loaded her rifle and checked the bore for grit before closing the airlock. It took a minute for the air to evacuate.

Kristjana's electrically garbled voice sputtered to life. Jonas had reactivated Rowan's wireless, giving it a limited range incapable of reaching the Ny Æsiri legions.

"Can you hear me?"

He nodded. The butterscotch sky crept into the small chamber as the cistern's lid slid open, releasing a flume of dust that floated to their feet.

Rowan hesitated, strange secondhand thoughts firing in his circuits like flash lamps.

"I-," he stammered. "-I think you should leave me here. Chain me to something. The Islander arcologies -I'll be humiliated. I don't think I can face them-"

"-Rowan, remember the 'Dispatch. You've turned the tide. You're a hero!"

He nodded and reluctantly ascended the ladder to the surface. The uneven ground was swallowed by the orange sandstorm. Thick and dense, the world around them looked like the sea floor, visibility limited to a hundred feet or less. Kristjana sealed the cistern and radioed command.

"Let's go."

Rowan disabled his left eye and switched the right to a lower register. No difference. The airborne sand was too heavy, shadow fading with the eddying dust. He'd lost his bearings and was forced to follow Kristjana into the maelstrom. He heard her cough, wet and full of phlegm.

"You've a cold or the start of pneumonia," Rowan said.

"What's cold?"

"-No Kristjana, a cold, like the flu. We'd Spanish Influenza in the trenches, miserable. Blighty'd Tommies all along the Front."

"It has to be something else. We haven't had an epidemic in the colony in over seventy-five years."

Rowan stopped, something was wrong. She was sick but didn't know it. Never having had a fever or a snuffle her entire life, she ignored the symptoms. He tried to think of an explanation. Had he contributed to her illness, like conquistadors bringing the germs? Maybe it was some disease he'd picked up on Earth -but how? He was dead, and she was alive. The nooks and crannies of his freeze-dried corpse were sterile, impossible for stowaway pathogens.

"Stop!" He yelled.

He noticed a shadow in his periphery approaching at a high rate of speed. Kristjana turned and aimed her weapon. Engel had the beat on her and fired a net cartridge. A shot exploded from Kristjana's rifle muzzle in exchange. Poorly aimed, it missed its target, the round ricocheting harmlessly off a boulder and into a small dune. Rowan sprinted after her but tripped over his chains. The net glided over him and wrapped itself around Kristjana like an octopus. She ripped and pulled at the webbing, but it was fibrous monofilament and impossibly strong.

Engelfrigg hadn't abandoned him on the battlefield after all. Hidden by her chameleon skin, she'd stalked the Islander's perimeter for days undetected, waiting for the right time to ambush. A dark force had set her in motion, no malfunction or misguided Mindre sabotage. In all likelihood it'd been Sigurd, a dark alchemy of betrayal in some convoluted plan to capture the Vanir with Rowan as bait.

"Get out of the way!" Kristjana yelled.

Rowan threw himself to the ground. In a desperate bid, Kristjana fired her rifle through the net. The round struck its mark but only chinked Engel's armor. The simulacrum aimed and blew a hole into Rowan's shoulder, tearing away the remains of his armor. Handless and mangled, his arm was useless. He struggled to stand but toppled over. Another shot knocked Kristjana's weapon free, the blowback stunning her. With a calm preprogrammed execution, Engel unreeled filament and bound Rowan into a contorted ball.

Kristjana thrashed trying to escape from the net. After securing him, Engel descended on her like an executioner, attaching a wrist spigot to her suit's outer plumbing. Rowan looked on helplessly. Engel released the injector into Kristjana's climate control. A burst of fog coated the inside of her face shield, her moans fading to electrical noise. She writhed then fell into coma, suffering a near fatal dose of phenohol.

"Engel! -Who's making you do this?"

She cocked her head, dumb.

"Sigurd pulling your strings?" Rowan groaned.

Engel loaded another net cartridge and fired it at him. Too depleted, he succumbed to the sticky fibers as they constricted. His Muspel levels were too low to fight. Captured, Engel bundled them both like fish in a net and hauled their bodies back towards the Ny Æsiri frontlines. Rowan reached out to hold Kristjana's hand but she was unresponsive, her segmented glove falling limp.

He wanted to scream, but there was no point. Engel was nothing but an expensive, highly adaptable tool, sent on a single-minded mission for which she was designed. Whatever glimmer of 'Ragna' that may've existed was exorcised, gone

completely. Engel, the mechanical savateuse, was a dog of war now, a hound commanded by a whisper from over the battlefield. Her emotional mimicry was trust in disguise.

Hours passed as she dragged them both through No Man's Land. Sand clung to the net's frayed fibers, coating everything with matte orange dust. Every bump released a wave of static shimmer like phosphorescent seawater. Rowan lost his bearings. Engel followed an impossibly circuitous route through the trenchlands, a maze of saps that skirted the frontlines. Drifting on the edge of coma, he noticed they'd suddenly stopped.

Gangly humanoids appeared through the storm, a lone 2nd Wave work party repairing a radio tower. They approached and inspected Engel's war-booty. She motioned a few undead to grab a nearby tote. One of the menigs cut through the netting as the others stood by and gawked at the crumpled unconscious war-booty. Much to his surprise, Kristjana was not the center of attention. It was Rowan.

Their decayed faces were wracked with confusion. What was this thing doing with an allied kommandant? Some reached for their weapons, but Engel quickly disarmed them with a few well-aimed phenohol darts. With Jonas having disabled his encryption, Rowan only heard garble. There was another voice booming through the cluttered babble. It was Sigurd. Rowan recognized his guttural tone. The 2nd Wave lahg obeyed him and quickly went about their business.

His Muspel beacon flashed critical. He'd be in coma soon, almost out of hydrokraft. Kristjana writhed half-conscious, coming around from the phenohol's anesthesia. The menigs grabbed hold of

them and loaded them into the awkward litter. Rowan looked up from the grave-like trench as they carried them both away. Skrekk and Frykt, Asgard's retarded moons broke through the wisped cloudscape above.

The storm had cleared.

[TD] CHAPTER NINETEEN

"Wake up." It was a familiar voice. "Wake up, Herr Guthrie. You're back in Odin's good graces."

Magnesium lamps saturated his good eye. He dimmed the white-hot with filters and looked around. It was one of Aldriroms prison cells, the Valhalla brig, but Rowan didn't recall the exact place. The brightness made it difficult to focus. One entire wall was reinforced window, an interrogation cell designed to cull intelligence. He crawled up to it and peered through the heavy reflection. Someone was standing on the other side, watching him.

"There you are!"

"-Aye," Rowan replied.

"Cleaned up nicely."

Rowan looked at himself. The grit was gone, air-rinsed from his many crevices. His wrist stump was clean and dressed, the svartblod scabbing the wound nicely. Replenished, they'd topped off his condensate, no longer energy starved and feeble. His dark reflection leaked from the window. He looked terrible, a shambling nightmare. There was no denying his ugliness.

"What do you want with me?"

"I want you to read something," he toggled the cell's monitor. It was a news clipping, written in English. He stood up and read it.

British Broadcasting Company, Monday, August 23,
2004

WWI bodies are found on glacier:

The bodies of three Austrian soldiers killed in World War I have been found on an Italian

glacier, almost perfectly preserved, an Italian museum says...

"You weren't found by accident. Sifting through temple archives, Viracocha priests found this bit of arcana. It gave them ideas. They launched the diomedeads and went hunting for the Western-Anglo trench heroes of the Great War," Sigurd explained. Rowan had been manipulated from the start.

"I'm not a hero."

"I tried to tell them that."

"Religious fanatics-"

"-Political fanatics. Politicians lose wars, soldiers win them."

"Something we actually agree on," Rowan mumbled, dazed.

He didn't remember the capture. Energy starved, his mind submerged into the netherworld of deep-blue dreamlands and reptile thoughts.

Engel was Sigurd's saboteur, not the enemy's. She'd been sent out into the rust-wastes to skip-trace. Disoriented, Rowan tried to frame time and space. He may've been out for an hour, a week, maybe a month.

"There was such hope for you," Sigurd shook his head in mock regret. "-The moguls said you were Con Tiqui's second coming. -Niflheim if the Tyrians weren't going to give their man-god command of both the Lif and Lifthrasir-"

"-I never wanted this-"

"-They kept you on ice for decades, waiting as the 3rd Wave constituted itself. You were the Suncasapa messiah, the warrior prophet. But I knew you weren't up to it, some relic with a junk-filled mind. You had to be conditioned and your lost humanity recovered from the time-fog."

Sigurd pulsed with jealousy, a nervous heartbeat modulating just deserts. There was a tidal surge in his monologue, angst overflowing.

"What're you talking about?"

"There, next to you."

Rowan inspected the cell. There was something sitting on the narrow bed's thin mattress. It was a crystal sealed parchment, yellowed and barely readable. He picked it up and looked it over. It was familiar, but he couldn't put his finger to it. What was he looking at?

"Do you recognize it?"

He shifted the light for a better look. With a shudder he dropped it to the floor, the case cracking into a thousand transparent splinters. It was Anna's letter. They'd recovered it from the glacier along with his other paltry affects. Skjærsild had kept it from him.

"Dear Rowan, it is with great pain that I must write you. I can no longer go on with our current arrangement, living in constant fear..." Sigurd quoted.

"-I know what it says," Rowan roared.

"And so do I... by heart." Sigurd dimmed the cell's lights, revealing the cellblock outside. He stood idly by the intercom and fidgeted, a half-smile curling his lips' broken flesh.

"You can still feel that bitch's burn, can't you, that broken heart's hollow ache sitting in your chest?"

"-Why are you doing this?-"

"I was ordered-"

"To manipulate me?"

"No, to make you a Ragnarok Suncasapa. Damn near impossible -Convincing the undead is like pulling red-foot from its shell. Under ice for some

thousand years, there was almost nothing to work with. So I had to dissect you, rework those gritty gears in your head."

"You don't know me."

"I know enough-"

"-Arrogance, Sigurd-"

"-There's always the id, Herr Guthrie, the prime mover of your reptile brain. Anna, that bitch that ruined you, was my gift, an unrequited heart perfectly engineered. Like a hidden vein, I tapped it. -No quarter for the lovelorn, Skuld's dark web of fate woven to spite the lovesick heart, all that..."

"-Enough-"

Sigurd continued. "-I was a highly decorated Ytter-Midgard kommandant. They were going to promote me to uber-kommandant, but the Tyrians pulled me away to train you, 'the prodigal Einherjar.' It was supposed to be an honor..." Sigurd huffed. "Instead it was a burden. You weren't Ny Æsiri, barely human and crippled by nostalgia. I could've done more with a gutter-rake. I used what I had, the letter. It was my duty. Skjærsild integrated her words into your cellemaskin filtering, a special recipe just for you."

"You're a bastard-"

Sigurd laughed. "-A resourceful bastard."

Pops and wheezes rolled around Rowan's skull, jittery machinations of emotional release, cold sweats and a butterfly-stomach swapped for head spasm. Arcoma skimmed the ragged twilight of his brain, skirting sanity like a tightrope walker. Every part of him felt manipulated, fraudulent.

"Ragna gave you this idea, didn't she? She broke your heart like Anna broke mine. You became

obsessed. She told me everything," Rowan snarled. Brain froth bubbled to his lips, saliva welling into desiccated sinuses.

"Not everything, or she'd be starving in the shelled out squalor of Ytter-Midgard."

"You treated her like an animal," Rowan seethed.

"I dropped her in your cage as your custodian. I gave her instructions to incubate desire -give you hope and make that bitch, Anna regret she left you. Now dead and long forgotten -what kind of harlot was she anyway? ...Giving herself so cheaply to some effete schoolteachers. Anyhow, you'd better things to do than bother with that tramp. You'd wars to win!"

"You know nothing about Anna. Don't pretend you do. I know of your and Ragna's history, however. I knew she was desperate, but I didn't know you'd a gun to her head. It's hard to believe that black heart of yours ever pumped."

"I saved both Ragna and her mother from the street. Exile in Ytter-Midgard just provided incentive. The dumb girl didn't even have the wits to appreciate the situation's gravity-"

"-Sod off, Sigurd!"

"-As strange as it may seem, without your contribution, our people would've succumbed to the yoke of terrorism. The Ny Æsiri may've very well lost Ragnarok," Sigurd carried on.

"The yoke of terrorism?" Rowan seethed, bemused. "-And from the mouth of a killer of Mindre women and children, no less. -And what do you mean without me? I lost that battle if you recall. The push was a devastating failure-"

"-It's the beginning of the end. You'll see. Your contribution to victory is greater than you think, a battle lost but a war won."

Rowan shook his head, clueless.

"Sometimes the innocent must be sacrificed for the greater good," Sigurd said, eyes menacing.

"Oh?" Rowan mocked.

The door at the end of the cellblock slid wide. It was a prisoner escort. A baggy environment suit and oversized pressure helmet hid the prisoner, but Rowan knew it was Kristjana. Two menigs escorted her into the cell across from his. With a thud, the transparent door shut behind her. She was in shock. The kuld-soldat saluted Sigurd and took their places at the far door. Limping painfully, she sat down on the narrow bed. White fog filled the chamber, equalizing the air. Exhausted, it was all she could do to remove the awkward suit.

Probe welts and saw-tooth incisions warped her naked body, her spine bruised purple. A blown vessel clouded her eye in syrupy red, the other unable to focus. Better that way, Rowan thought, he'd too much shame to look her in the eye anyhow. She'd been vivisected like a lab animal. Skin-glue bandaged her wounds, transparent windows of surgical scarring. Sigurd stood by cruelly. She was the Ny Æsiri's first Vanir prisoner of war, and Sigurd could hardly contain himself.

"What've you done to her?" Rowan said.

"Vanir physiology is amazing. Human beings have adapted to Asgard's weirdness most curiously. Bones are thinner, muscle sinewy and internal organs- shifted. The surgical photographs are stunning."

Rowan looked at Sigurd stupefied. Kristjana shivered, the fever ripped through her wave-like, sweat beads dabbed by matted hair. She tried but failed to writhe into her thermal undergarments.

The sickness had warped her into an elderly mimic. She could do nothing but curl up and shiver. He looked away.

"She's sick. She needs medicine," Rowan pleaded.

"Look at her."

"I am looking at her! Help her for Christ's sake--"

"Only you can help her--"

"-What? -"

Sigurd waved a small purple vial in front of him, beaded with a needlepoint.

"It's an antibody designed to destroy the sykmaskin. You can save her if you'll answer a few questions."

"-What's sykmaskin? How do you know what's making her sick?"

Sigurd shrugged. He'd something to do with her illness. Guilt dumped like cloudburst. Sigurd had played his card. Rowan was the secret weapon. It wasn't gas attacks or some munitions juggernaut. Dysterfolk were the weapon. Rowan looked at Sigurd, victory in his eyes. It was checkmate.

"-You've unleashed plague haven't you?"

"-Skjærsild designed the virus, Vidar Torstein specifically."

"Vidar wouldn't--"

"-He discovered it by accident, actually. Vidar didn't intend to create the disease. It started as exotic stuff, full dysterfolk conversions. Skjærsild's 4th Wave was going to be a near-human afterlife, true immortality. -None of this..." Sigurd gesticulated the ends of his anatomy. "-crude embalming nonsense that's transmogrified our cadavers. True Skikk was going to be reincarnation, everlasting life, but the process didn't sync with human physiology. The organics

mutated into a cancerous svartblod pathogen. The self-replicating cellemaskin spread like viral contagion."

Rowan shook his head toddler-like, bullfrog eyes wide in disbelief. He remembered Storbitt, Vidar's saber-toothed cat. It was part of the experiment. Hyper-Skikk he'd called it. There'd been a reason for Vidar's apprehension. The hybridization wasn't just key to everlasting life, it sowed the seed of its undoing.

"Vidar halted testing on human remains altogether, but his underlings noticed a graft of recombinant that mimicked disease vectors. I coaxed Sverre to shuffle the project off to Skjærsild. Vidar had no stomach for biological weaponry, the old fool. Always a bit of his uncle in him-"

Rowan held his tongue.

"Bodily fluid exchange was the first prototype, but they evolved the sykmaskin to be airborne. It gave me an idea. Lobbying the Tyrians, I became the project's chief liaison at Skjærsild-" Sigurd explained.

"-I saw you and Einar injecting the Einherjar in the Valkyrie bays." Rowan knew something was up when he'd happened upon them like naughty schoolchildren. It had reeked of skullduggery. "-There wasn't any draugar inoculate in those green sacks was there?"

Sigurd shook his head. "The opposite, it was draugar-trigger, a cocktail mixed with sykmaskin-"

"-We were hosts!" Rowan stuttered with rage, "-I delivered the virus-"

"-Like a bomb-"

"-And Engel was your insurance, leashed to manipulate me."

Engel had exploited him with her inchoate hypnosis. The simulacrum hadn't been an agent of the Islanders or the Mindre. Like he'd suspected, she was Sigurd's tool, his puckish agent. He'd used Ragna's affections to insinuate Engel into Rowan's tuning, a pacifying surrogate. And Rowan, like a trout, had snagged the hook's worm.

Using Engel as his proxy, it was Sigurd who'd crippled Rowan's legion with draugarism. It was Sigurd that'd marched Rowan into Islander custody. He was nothing but an Indian smallpox blanket, a biological agent with legs and arms able to penetrate the enemy's defenses.

"You set up the Lifthrasir to fail."

"Brilliant wasn't it?" Sigurd exclaimed jovially.

"It's bloody insane! Do you realize what you've done?"

"-By Con Tiqui himself. You've delivered the death blow to the Vanir, guided by my steady hand-"

"-You knew they'd take me prisoner, a high ranking Lifthrasir kommandant. You're whole offensive was a bullocks, a feint to get me behind enemy lines."

"After Stridshanske, I knew you'd go it alone and disobey me," Sigurd said, nonchalantly. "It was a fool's errand. I knew that. I never really cared about battle tactics, strategy, all that..."

It explained Sigurd's laziness and antagonism at Bifrost. He was going through the motions to keep up appearances, all the while using Rowan as his idiotic stooge. It had all been stagecraft, an act to muddy the clandestine waters.

"How long have you been planning this Deus Ex Machina?"

"From the first day. A stand up fight against the Vanir was impossible. I'm not stupid. I poured over every single intelligence dispatch. The Asgard Vanir are like Spartans, formidable. -Look at that beast of a bomb they let go on Kdt. Grov- One hundred years of stalemate, I'd no delusions. Surtur's reports pegged Valhalla's thermal capacity at only one Asgardian year. It was going to be impossible to mount a conventional attack."

"You knew then?"

Sigurd nodded. "Of course."

"-This isn't a war, this is genocide. You'll kill them all with that disease!" Rowan roared.

"-Genocide, pesticide, all a matter of interpretation. To conquer an army, you have to conquer its people. This is total war, Herr Guthrie."

"Not true! This is insanity!"

"It's always been true. Anything else is propaganda. War's ugly. Conquest is ugly. But if you can indulge it, victory's yours. And look at us... dysterfolk undead, it doesn't come any uglier."

"Rubbish!"

"-Denial!" Sigurd shouted back.

"Your plan is filth!"

"-My plan exceeded expectation. Engel reported she recaptured you near a cistern linking their forward lines. With sykmaskin's high volatility, the virus should reach every living thing on this rusted rock in a month."

"This was your plan to win Ragnarok?-"

"-All along-"

"-Shameful. Where's the glory?-"

"Victory is victory, Herr Guthrie, achieved before the battle's fought. If your British

generals had figured that out, you probably wouldn't be here," Sigurd joked sadistically. "The Ny Æsiri's victory at Ragnarok was never in doubt."

It was obvious now. The strange occurrences were no longer a mystery. Everything had been by design. It wasn't Vanir espionage but Sigurd, setting the stage.

"You altered my longship's trajectory, sent my Valkyrie wing drifting behind enemy lines. You wanted us to crash-land, come in contact with enemy and spread your disease."

"It was worth a shot. I figured curiosity might bring the Vanir out of their nests, enticed by such an overt display of incompetence. I've got to give them credit though. They didn't take the bait. Instead of meat-hooking your Lifthrasir, they executed your downed kuld-soldat where they lay."

Sigurd wasn't a man any more, wasn't dead or alive. He was nothing but a shell, a wretched construct, shambling through a shadow-world like an abomination.

"You were going to ask me questions," Rowan mumbled.

"Right-"

"-I'll answer them, if you give Kristjana the sykmaskin anti-body."

"I'll arrange it."

Sigurd left, leaving Rowan to stare at Kristjana, dying and helpless. Her shivering was more paroxysmal. He stood up to look at her. Her eyes fluttered underneath swollen lids, dried spittle collecting on the corners of her mouth. Her lips moved, forming feverish sleep-speech

stovepiped from a fiery brain. She didn't have long.

#

He sat in the briefing room, watching the green flicker of the monitor suspended above him. It was a movie, a video recording of a person restrained in a hospital bed. The image was fuzzy, the camera jittering as it focused. Sigurd lounged on a sofa-couch as he controlled the movie with a handheld remote. Rowan wasn't sure why Sigurd was doing this or what it was going to accomplish, but if it'd get the antibody to Kristjana, he'd oblige him.

"This recording was from a year ago in one of Skjærsild's katedral bays--"

"That person's not dead." Rowan exclaimed.

"Not dead but barely alive."

The camera zoomed in as technicians hovered over the patient. Rowan couldn't tell what was going on, the commotion was confused by the blurred monochrome. The camera refocused and Rowan saw the patient. It was Sigurd, suffering from his sickness.

"The sykmaskin!" Rowan exclaimed. "It killed you."

He remembered Sigurd's death throes, his crumpled body exploding with cough and sputum at the Midgard skyport. It was the sykmaskin. But he'd been walking the streets of Midgard, exposing everyone to the pandemic. No one had caught it.

"Why didn't it spread?"

"The viral add-on hadn't been applied yet. I contracted the virus through direct injection. Skjærsild needed its patient-zero, a human subject used to study its affects. So I volunteered," Sigurd said coolly, his voice calm and collected.

Rowan said nothing. He could smell Sigurd's hellish brimstone through phantom nostrils. He released the tendril-chair petals and swiveled to face him. Sigurd's demon-eyes, black and pupilless gazed back at him. Rife with jealousy and unable to stomach Rowan's command, Sigurd had become an Einherjar himself in a bid to take joint command. It was a link in his overall conspiracy. By insuring the viral weapon worked, he could then deploy it on Asgard and secure his place in Ny Æsir history.

"A zealous suicide? You're a fanatic!"

"Not suicide," Sigurd sneered. "-Sacrifice. Those Ytter-Midgard cockroaches blow themselves up at checkpoints without a thought. Extremists or freedom fighters, what's the difference? I fight for something. If that means dying for that cause, then so be it-"

"-It's madness."

Rowan could only imagine the death at the hands of such a disease. He remembered the Tommies with Spanish Flu, blue faced, blood-dribbling lungs, drowning in their own burnt-green mucous. Their deaths were hemorrhage filled spasms, feverish delirium in a catastrophic nightmare. And for Sigurd to offer himself up to that death was beyond comprehension.

"I'm a martyr, an Einherjar hero to the Ny Æsir."

"You're nothing. You threw yourself away out of spite for her-"

"-Look at you," Sigurd sneered, getting up to pace the shadows. "It all comes back to a girl, doesn't it? It's amazing how that pulpy heart's weakened you, still holding on to the phantom world of the living... pathetic."

"Better that than holding onto your berserker none sense, some worn out old folk tail... Bitterness is what you've sowed, built on axioms long defunct."

"The Vanir are real. Viracocha foresaw Lifheim after Ragnarok. It's pre-ordained. The Ny Æsiri will triumph over Loki, and Odin will show the Einherjar the way."

"Lies, fairy-stuff -Do you actually believe all that?"

Sigurd grinned. "And what pray-tell, Herr Guthrie, do you believe?"

"The Vanir don't exist. It's a Mindre-Æsiri insurgency. The Asgard Vanir are colonists from Heimdall, Islanders fighting off an invasion. You're blind. The Tyrians lied to you."

Sigurd smirked. "Does it matter, really? Victors write history not the conquered. I'm an Einherjar kuld-soldat and Ny Æsiri interests are at risk. Everything else is philosophy. I do whatever it takes. We're in the middle of Ragnarok, Fimbulwinter-"

"-Fimbulwinter is a lie!"

"Is that what that Vanir bitch told you? Don't believe it."

"I'll believe whatever I please."

"It doesn't matter now anyway. You're going to do what I tell you."

"Doubtful-"

"-At this point you don't have a choice." He held up the purple vial of antibody, dangling it over the floor and threatening to drop it. "You're going to answer a question for me about the 'Dispatch.'"

"-I don't know what you're talking about."

"Niflheim you don't. This sound familiar?" Sigurd scanned through the monitor archives and played an audio recording. "...Rowan, remember the 'Dispatch. You've turned the tide of this war..."

It was Kristjana's voice recorded over the wireless. Rowan said nothing.

"Engel recorded this on her link outside the cistern. I'm interested, how exactly have you 'turned the tides of war'? We've torn your little friend apart looking for data implants and we've scanned you, nothing." Sigurd put the vial underneath his boot and threatened to crush it. "Don't make me ask you again."

"You really want to know?"

He nodded.

"I was going to open a diplomatic channel to the Tyrians, negotiate peace with the moguls, bypassing you all together. Their communications ministry was going to give me a letter to transmit back to Ny Midgard."

"Now whose the liar?"

"It's the goddamned truth!"

Sigurd smirked and circled the chamber shark-like. "After a few more hours of watching your blue-eyed friend drown in lung-fluid, maybe you'll be more forthcoming. But I could be wrong -I forget, you've a thing for dead girls."

Rowan had had enough. "You're a child, Sigurd. This place may be Purgatory, but it's your Hell."

"Purgatory? Now who's beholden to ancient religions?" he smirked.

"-Enough," Rowan said, his voice steady and even. "You're green-eyed, Sigurd. The sykmaskin virus didn't kill you, that coal-black heart of yours did all that. You saw in me your own loathsome reflection and tried to burn me in

effigy. But it didn't work." Rowan's eyes were low and mean. "I wouldn't oblige you."

"Your brain's befouled- " Sigurd replied. "Full of lies."

"I was the interloper, disrupting best laid plans. Sigurd Asperheim, a decorated kommandant in Ytter-Midgard's shadow insurgency, brutalizing the hordes with a Tyrian sanctioned fist, was slated for promotion. Then Skjærsild resurrected me and ruined everything. The prize was Asgard, the war of Ragnarok. Ytter-Midgard was just a nuisance. You couldn't stand loitering on Earth. It wasn't enough for you."

"-You're an artifact! -a lost child!"

"-It wasn't my sudden promotion that threw you into a cacophonic rage..." Rowan continued, ignoring Sigurd's outbursts. "You found Anna's letter in the glacial jetsam and were curious."

"Curious?" Sigurd laughed. "Of what?"

"That morning at Ypres -How I turned defeat into a victory. You sent Ragna to reconnoiter, dredge up the emotional muck hidden inside me. Like an haruspex, you hovered over the entrails for answers. You were going to kill two-birds with one stone, punish the girl and satisfy your curiosity. Something tells me I disappointed you."

Sigurd grabbed a lung-gun from a nearby hutch and pushed it against Rowan's temple. Rowan closed his eyes.

"Disappointed? Victory at Ragnarok on Asgard, you call that disappointing? And Ragna ... I'll never see her again, but she'll be forced to remember me. I will be on every marquee in Ny Midgard. Those self-flagellating priests will chant my name forever-"

"-A hollow victory." Rowan said calmly. He could feel the muzzle-flanges raking his scalp, little syllabic-punches bouncing into his skull. "You're dead and she's still alive."

"-Dead -alive, what's the difference?"

Rowan shrugged. "You know the difference. Ragna was remarkable-"

"-A bitch! A whore!"

"-Remarkable," Rowan repeated. "-Like a rabbit in a snake-pit, you dropped her in with me, this god-awful undead beast. The girl didn't know what to expect, black pupil-less eyes, blue-gray flesh, and a metal mouth talking at her like a living breathing man. Those first few days she was terrified. But she couldn't refuse. You'd extorted her. She was a strong girl, and she cared for me despite my monstrosity-"

"You disgusted her," Sigurd foamed.

Rowan stiffly shook his head, the gun muzzle pushing into his ear. "You couldn't have her, so you sanctimoniously killed yourself to extort pity. You tried to break her, but you failed."

A swift crack of the rifle butt knocked Rowan's jaw loose. Half dislocated, he pushed the mandible back into the socket. Incensed, Sigurd cracked his skullcap, tearing the anchor strips. Svartblod hissed, evaporating into the empty air.

"I'll shackle you to a chair, cut your eyelids open and make you watch that Vanir bitch die if you don't tell me what I want to know."

"-Ragna," Rowan ignored Sigurd's threat. "Didn't just make me forget Anna, even though that was your plan, she showed me kindness-"

"All artificial!"

Rowan shook his head. "-No, it was real. She was an angel. She saw a light in me I thought'd gone

out. Anna's surrogate became just Ragna, a sweet beautiful girl who'd suffered more from war than anyone should have to.

"-Beautiful? In the eye of the beholder as they used to say." Sigurd pulled the weapon back from Rowan's head.

"You want to know my secret?"

"-You've no secrets, Herr Guthrie-"

"I do, a secret you've been trying to dig out of me since Skjærsild -How I defeated the Huns that December morning."

"Humor me, Herr Guthrie," Sigurd sighed.

"-It was hope."

"Hope? That's your little gem of wisdom?"

"It's something you'll never understand-"

"-Enough!"

Sigurd stood idly by like a mannequin. Minutes passed. Then without warning, he threw his gun to the ground and grabbed Rowan by the throat, pushing him up against the tendril-chair petals. Rabid spittle vaporized in locomotive rage. Punches followed, unrelenting like a steam-hammer. Zinc-teeth became unmoored, cheeks tissue pulverized between the anvil fists. Sigurd wasn't just trying to punish Rowan; he was trying to destroy him. Dead weight toppled to the floor. He tried to rollover but Sigurd continued his assault. No pain, but the beatings were slowly disassembling his skeletal scaffold.

"The world you've made will fall, an empire of sand. It won't last," Rowan moaned.

Like a burnt bulb, his weak eye burst in its socket, leaving the other to blur. Rowan tried to crawl away but Sigurd pulled him underneath, boot heels digging deep, fists pounding. Svartblod ruptures perforated his ribcage, bubbles of

stringy flesh bulging against the insides of his
shielding.

He felt another knock then coma.

[TD] CHAPTER TWENTY

He rolled his eye to look at her. She was sitting up, dressed in her thermals. At some point she'd found the energy to cloth herself. No sound, but Rowan could see her tremble as her body seized with coughing fits. She sipped a small container of water but did not look at him. He struggled with his funky eye and looked outside the cell. Perched conspicuously on a nearby bench was the purple vial clamped to an armature. Rowan was meant to see it -the carrot dangling on the stick.

He sat up and looked over his worn cadaver. The damage was severe. The scab residue struggled to bond the tears and punctures, but it was the internal ruptures that made movement difficult. Snapped bone fragments floated between the ropy strands of muscle giving movement a loose rubbery control. He stood up and stumbled, the cellemaskin hurriedly rebuilding its associations. Pounding his fist did nothing. The transparent cell-door was too insulated.

Two menigs guarded the outside. Rowan struggled to get their attention, but they'd gone into standby -eyes fixed and unmoving. There was nothing he could throw. The cell had been stripped -just an anchored metal bench, a light fixture and the outer intercom. Hours drifted and Kristjana grew weaker. Her reprieve deteriorated as the sykmaskin accelerated its viral destruction. Blood stained the mucous strands with each lung-hack, vacant eyes gazing mindlessly.

Rowan yelled. He stood to get the guard's attention and pointed at the purple vial

repeatedly until they finally noticed. Like wind-up soldiers they sprung to life. Rowan pointed at the intercom, begging them like dumb children.

"Are you ready to talk about the 'Dispatch?' one said.

Rowan nodded.

"We'll notify uber-Kdt. Asperheim," the other said. "He'll arrive in a few hours."

"Where is he?" Rowan asked.

"Out in the field, near 'Toe-Stub-Jaundice'."

"There's not enough time! Take me to him and give her the antibody, now!"

"We can't do that, Herr Guthrie."

"It's either that or I don't talk. Radio uber-Kdt. Asperheim and tell him that."

The two menigs looked at each other, their synaptic circuitry hissing.

"You two, did you serve under me?"

One of the menig's nodded.

"What legion? What lahg? Do you remember me, your Lifthrasir kommandant?"

"Of course. I served with you at Feltskanse. I was with you and the simulacrum in the tunnels - Lahg 15, Menig Mons Dahl-"

"Good Dahl! Let me out and take me to Sigurd. There's no time. She's dying."

Dahl turned off the intercom and talked over the matter with his fellow menig. Excruciating minutes passed. Rowan kept an eye on Kristjana. She was doubled over in dry heaves. Her skin looked paper-thin, beauty draining away like rain-soaked watercolor.

"We'll take you back to the briefing room. The kommandant is on his way."

At last, Rowan's body jittered and twitched with energy. Air escaped through ceiling vents, his

internal injuries amplified with the depressurization -joints twisting as internal pockets of gaseous svartblod crackled and hissed. The cell door broke its pressure seal and slid upward.

"Walk out slowly and turn around."

They were going to shackle him for the walk. Rowan waited patiently as Dahl fumbled with the restraints. The other menig reached for the door switch. Rowan made his move. A swift kick to the chest and Dahl stumbled backward. Using his stump-arm as a truncheon, he knocked the other menig into the cell. Halfway in, the menig fought to get back out but the door drove them both to the floor, pinioned. Rowan's mangled arm stopped the hydraulic door from sealing. Dahl climbed to his feet, grabbed his weapon, and targeted Rowan's head.

"Submit, Kdt. Guthrie!"

"No!"

"Alright then, uber-Kdt. Asperheim will be most disappointed."

Dahl hiked the weapon and fingered the trigger. Using his body as a flail, Rowan knocked the muzzle away. Sizzling-white erupted from the bulbous barrel. Tucking his head into his shielding, the round smacked the door and shattered the glass into spider-web. Smoke dispersed to reveal the cratered head of the other menig, glass shards filling his half-empty skull like a thunder egg.

The vice-like door pinched and severed Rowan's arm under the elbow. Freed, he grabbed the barrel of Dahl's lung-gun -the muzzle melting his fingertips- and threw him through the shattered glass and into the cell. Crawling to the door

panel, Rowan hit the pressure valve. Air rushed out as tornadoes of gas screamed into the cellblock. Dahl fought as he stumbled blind over the ruins of his partner. Reaching down, Rowan grabbed the dropped lung-gun and twisted its fuel cord to aim it. The blast flooded the cell, coating its wall in runny streaks of Dahl's purplish svartblod.

Rowan uncoupled the lung-gun from the other menig's chest spigot and attached it to his own. Slinging the weapon, he patched into the intercom. Kristjana was skimming unconsciousness, the commotion barely stirring her. He yelled her name. She turned her neck, a vacant eye peering up at him through stringy hair.

"I've got the antibody." He reached for the vial. "Put on the suit and I'll come in."

She shook her head.

"Find the strength," he said, waving the antibody. "This will save you."

"It's over," she whispered. "You've seen to that."

Humiliation.

Sigurd must've told her about the virus designed to spread through the Islander arcologies. Self-loathing boiled. "I didn't mean to -Sigurd, he orchestrated it."

Her head fell against her chest.

"Please, don't do this!"

She shook her head again. "Get the cure to Povinis. Maybe our scientist can reproduce it. Don't waste it here."

Rowan loitered dumb, lost, and helpless.

"Go find them," she whispered.

"I can't leave you like this. Maybe if we use just a little-"

She was weak, every word draining her. "Find Janus if the disease hasn't taken him-"

"-Of course-"

"-And..." she paused. "I want you to kill me-"

Rowan froze, pressed to the inch-thick glass. She put her hand to his -sweat beading on small blonde hairs. Her pupils dilated strangely eclipsing her turquoise irises. He wanted to leave her there and forget about her like a sack of feral kittens dropped into a river, but duty compelled him.

"Quiet, Kristjana. It's the fever talking."

"I've my wits. I know exactly what I'm saying."

"Don't make me do this," Rowan said, his voice shaky.

"You owe me this, Rowan."

Rowan did owe her. He owed her the future of her homeland, but it was going to be damn near impossible to deliver. He had to try; he had to carry out her last wish, make a go at it and forget about his shame and unwitting betrayal. There was no time. He bit through the corner of his lower lip.

"There's probably enough air in the suit. Maybe-"

"-No!" Dilated eyes burned through the fever-fog, lucid. "Get on with it."

He wiped dry tears from his defunct eye and reached for the pressure valve.

"No," Kristjana said, weakly pointing to his weapon. "It'll be quicker."

Rowan stepped back and kneeled. He cocked the rifle to his shoulder and rested the barrel on his armless elbow, fingering the trigger. His weapon-eye had soured forcing him to turn his head

awkwardly to will the gun's aim. She inched along the bed and offered up her head.

"I'm not an executioner-"

"-This isn't your fault."

"-But it is-"

"Christ forgives you -Do it Rowan-"

He paused then re-aimed the weapon. He waited for her eyes to close. The lung-gun gurgled, the hydrokraft mixing in the inner chamber. A burp of energy fell from the barrel then kicked. The round did its dirty work. Kristjana disappeared, replaced by a bow-wake of bloodstained splinters chased by rotten smoke. Rowan didn't wait for the aftermath. On his way out he donned Dahl's helmet and swapped out the menig's shoulder-pad emblems.

The outer door emptied into the main Aldiroms. The same vrak Engel had almost beheaded sat behind its console. Rowan walked by and saluted. The vrak did not salute back. From the corner of his good eye, Rowan saw the colorless cellblock carnage in the monitor; the vrak had hit the silent alarm.

"Time to meet whatever god created you, brother." Rowan pointed the lung-gun at its head. A quick burst and the cripple fell apart.

There was little time. Sigurd would dispatch whatever Einherjar Black-hand Gang was necessary and without hesitation. He'd nothing now -no hostage, no intelligence. Desperate, there'd be no quarter if Rowan were caught, so he made for the circuitous underbelly of Valhalla. There were exhaust vents perforating the upper tier of the thermal mines. He just had to locate a ghost-derrick and follow the corrugated pipe up to the surface. Disguising his amputated arm, he set out with a slow deliberate pace to cloak his limp.

Work gangs of lumbering vrak passed by, spouting bits of verbal nonsense. Sigurd had removed Rowan's encryptor; there was no way to converse with them now or any of Valhalla's undead for that matter. He said nothing and kept walking.

Rowan found one of the abandoned wells in a dark alcove, just a flicker of a nearby lamp. He looked around before making his move. Swiftly, he removed a rusted grate and wiggled into the narrow vent beyond. The exhaust tubes were small. Dangling mud stalactites filled the warren, slow going for sure. Handholds disintegrated into flakes as he crawled. He kicked and pushed, his stump-arm adding leverage. Infrared grew too dim. Rowan stopped to let the dust settle. As the minutes passed, grainy structure emerged attenuated roots of light seeping into the planetary crust. He struggled until -like a mole- he broke the surface.

Valhalla's iron buttresses loomed above. The soil's greasy residue left him with a sturdy layer of brown-rust camouflage. He was somewhere near Valgrind's back door, a waste complex filled with belching pipes and gurgling oil dumps too viscous to sublime. It was seldom visited, just a few man-sized antennas haunting the fringe. Rowan made for the clear, slipping from boulder to boulder like a spooked rodent.

The frontlines were too risky and the Einherjar would be on notice. The only escape was to flank the front and make for the Tharsis Montes badlands, ground too rough for waging war. It was east of Valhalla's outer perimeter and infrequently patrolled. Topographic intelligence was sketchy. No one had given the place much thought. The broken desert was once an ancient

network of tributaries and rivers carved by flowing water now buried as water ice. Left behind were the narrow canyons of layered basalt filled with islands of top-heavy mesas and rock chimneys. It provided the best, but slowest route to the Islanders.

The afternoon sun kicked up a forest of dust tornadoes, reducing visibility to a few hundred yards. Careful to avoid open gullies, Rowan crept through the stepping-stone zigzag of shadow. Povinis was somewhere north of his position. 'Dead reckoning' -given his condition- took on a new meaning as he struggled for bearing. Eventually, the jumbled land gave way to deeper wider canyons that cut through the geological confusion like a railroad grade. Beyond the cut lay the Povinis rise. He could see its planetoid bulge heaving above the horizon limb. Cautiously, he descended to the rift floor, unnerved by the exposure.

Another globe-swallowing sand storm was on the move, the crest of Povinis fading into the sky's flat dirty orange. The svartblod had collected a coagulated glob of grime at his elbow forming tentacles that swung limp and gooey as he walked. Injuries piled up like unpaid bills, numb pressure blurring into a body-funk that slowed his pace. Rowan's cadaver was quickly deteriorating. He had to get north to find the arcologies.

Hours wore on. The sun sank below the rift's western face, replaced by starlight. It was impossible to know how far he'd gone or how many miles lay ahead. His bad eye ruptured completely and he'd pulled it out like an egg from a pickle jar. With depth of field lost, he stumbled into rocks and boulders like a drunk until at last he fell. Rowan looked around the blood-dark world.

Had he been walking in circles? There were footprints in the sand, just a single set heading in the opposite direction. He recognized them, hourglass-like and twice the size of man. They didn't belong to a wayward kuld-soldat. Each print was too elegant and well placed, lacking the clumsy dysterfolk stumble.

"Engel."

Sigurd had again set loose his rottweiler. Engelfrigg was by her nature a stalker and an unrelenting predator. All the add-ons -engramming and whatnots- were window dressings for her primary purpose. Rowan knew there'd be no escape without a fight. And his chances were dwindling by the minute. The track led to the southwest heading into one of the rift crags that perforated the valley wall. Snaking through the badlands, she'd eventually find his limp-drag trail and double back. He surveyed the rocky aeries looking for ambush cover.

He climbed to a small outcrop and lodged himself into the crotch of a cluster of rock needles. Halfway up the cliff, it provided vantage over the rift's northerly and southerly approaches. He propped the lung-gun in the 'V' of boulder crack and waited.

A day passed.

His cadaver idled into quisi-hibernation, synaptic discharge cued by the movement of dust devils and the odd tumbling rock. Hydrokraft levels were up but they wouldn't last long and neither would the Islanders. The virus was spreading.

Something in the twilight caught his eye.

Engel materialized from nowhere, conjured like a golem from the sand. In a weak attempt to hide his

path, he'd tried to dust over his footprints but to no avail. Engel's augury and soft-logic were quickly computing his location. He was sure of it. Rowan could only delay the inevitable, so he decided to act. He focused the lung-gun flange to insure a tight long-distance burst.

He took aim and let loose a sputter fusillade, the glow-tracers strobing the valley like fireflies. With an antenna wiggle, she contorted and bent like a ballerina, the rounds skimming past her sinewy body with ease. He held his fire for a moment. She armed her rifle and danced over the pebbly sand as she approached. Rowan took aim again and let loose. Nothing. She skipped around the volley like hopscotch.

"Thermal tracking." Rowan unplugged the chest spigot and tossed the lung-gun. "Bloody useless".

She was able to trace every round, her telemetry sensors undefeatable. The Islanders had removed his krigkniv. Rowan had no weapon save the blunt end of his fist. Impassive, he stood by as high-velocity rounds whizzed in through the narrow cracks. She'd soon be scaling the spiny rock wall like a wild monkey. Then it'd be over-the-top, a quick rifle blast and annihilation.

Rowan had an idea. Frantically, he went about collecting a few palm-sized rocks until he'd stockpiled a small pile of basalt missiles. Engel's rifle speed rivaled Artemis, so there was only a split-second window in between fire-bursts to let loose a stoning. Peeking over the ledge, he saw her scanning the wall as she plotted her pitch. He reached for the flattest pebble in the heap and flung it.

With a skip and a bounce the rock landed harmlessly at the simulacrum's feet. Engel stood

back, her buggy lens probing the haze as she scanned the aeries. Perturbed, she let loose a poorly aimed rifle volley. Rock splinters exploded, sending dust plumes mushrooming upward. Quickly, Rowan grabbed another stone and hurled it. Grazing her shoulder, the rock spun off into the dust. Rowan ducked to the ground and grabbed another. The cold basalt had evaded Engel's infrared oculars, countering her guidance trackers. She hadn't been engineered to fend off such Cro-Magnon attacks.

Rowan waited as she clambered up. He tossed everything he had at her, an avalanche of spinning tumbling fragments. Like an insect, she clung to the wall. The stoning was having its desired affect. He picked up a slice of jagged igneous and jostled its weight then aimed and let fly.

The missile struck home. Her lopsided eye exploded, reducing it to a fizzling charred crater. She fell end-over-end back to the canyon floor. Like a maimed animal, the humanoid gimped about weirdly. She groped helplessly for her rifle but her weapon-appendage had decoupled and javelined into the dirt out of reach.

Anxiety faded to indecision. He had to climb down and finish her.

The gulch was steep. A chute etched into the cliff was just large enough for a man. He'd pulled himself up a day ago but climbing down offered new perspective. Rowan searched for a handhold and noticed something shiny jutting out an arm's lengths away.

He looked down. Engel continued to founder, unable to walk. Lodging his fist into a crack, he swung out and stretched to have a look. It was a pile of broken machinery like re-entry debris, a

collection of crumpled metal and shredded fabric. Hoping to find a useable weapon, Rowan fought his way over to the wreckage.

Thick dust coated the heap. Whatever it was hadn't been jettisoned from the recent 3rd Wave crossing; it'd been there for years. Rowan grabbed hold of a pipe arm, something he could use as a cudgel. Wrenching it free, he unburied more of the wreckage. Static-rich dust sparked and fell off in clumps. Another twist and the metal broke away, taking with it a brick-sized lump coated with heating fins. Shaped like a mace. It was perfect.

There was writing etched into the brushed aluminum, not Ny Æsiri script but English. He knocked off the grit and inspected it. A sun-bleached Union Jack stared back at him. Reds and blues faded to brown, but the crossed-spar of the English and Scottish flags was unmistakable. He looked up and around, half-dumb and smiling. Asgard shimmered under the alien stars-cape, an inhuman wasteland devoid of all things terrestrial. Yet its history wove a human story unfettered and ageless. Like a curtain falling to reveal the backstage machinations, the coma-dream folded. The Ny Æsiri may've been the last empire on Asgard, but it definitely wasn't the first. Mother Britain had left her mark. Rowan felt overwhelmed -no tears, only a weak jawed euphoria.

It was Britannia come to bless him.

HMS Fitzroy was engraved into the warped chassis, a shipwrecked vessel from the United Kingdom, etched with technical information Rowan did not understand. The business end of his ad-hoc cudgel sported a yellow propeller-symbol, three perfect blades surrounded by a dot. What the symbol meant, he'd no idea. He gave it a closer

look when his vision blurred. Ozone wisps of ionization zapped the dust as unseen forces moved the vapor around in whirls and eddies. There was magic inside, disruptive electrical power able to cause malfunction. It was perfect.

Hopping down to the flats, he heaved the truncheon onto his shoulder and circled Engel. She'd clambered to her feet, crouching and reaching at him like a blind beggar. Her antennae twitched as she honed her remaining sense. A flopped wrist exposed scalpel and razor blades, the other tugging at the monofilament whip she'd unwound from her chest. Rowan stepped towards her. Peripheral remnants of Engel's eye gave her enough crude capability to notice shadow and movement. Flailing, she struck out.

The monofilament looped as she reefed it like a gladiator net. He leaned back and parried. Swinging the cudgel, Rowan aimed at her head. She blocked with her knife-hand, the blunt weapon shattering the delicate blades. With a flip, her wrist snapped and doubled-back to restore her hand. Rowan lunged and drove the head of the mace into her. The ancient energy folded her up like a moth to flame. She cowered as he came at her. The star-flanges of the cudgel battered her, warping the light of her chameleon casing.

With fury, he let loose with steam-hammer execution. The bullwhip snarl of her monofilament swung impotent, unable to connect. Synthetic fingernails raked and punctured the soft parts of his leg. Rowan had her down, his foot planted on her bulbous chest, her pearl-white shell coming apart with each successive blow. Until at last, she grabbed his ankle and threw him. He fell to the ground. There was noise like a dying songbird,

warbled squeals stealing the electric silence. It was Engel, harmonizing and trying to communicate. Rowan struggled to understand the wispy-flute noises, all babble. The empathetic thread had been severed. She was alien to him now, evoking nothing.

He'd dislocated her hip-socket. Engel crawled away, her leg bent strangely as it flopped. Rowan whirled the makeshift sledge over his head then let loose. The mace's heat-fins collided with her back plate. A growl vomited over the wireless. She was succumbing. Violent epileptic twitches wracked her as frothy gas leaked from her innards. Blow after blow broke the ball-socket relieving her of the leg altogether. Rowan kicked it aside and went after the other, ripping her apart like child would an insect.

The pounding continued until Engel was nothing, reduced to a husk and barely moving. Rowan paused and dropped the cudgel, its mysterious energy slowing him. Amoeba blotches of rainbow slid over his retina like soap film like an ethereal interference. The 'propeller' symbol had to be a warning left by his British ancestors. The voodoo trapped inside was volatile, poisonous to both machine and men. He moved away from it.

With the tip of his boot, Rowan flipped Engel onto her back, her antennas bent and broken. The elegant machine was no more. An internal electrical fire was ravaging her, leaving behind a husk stained with the color of burnt motor oil. Her omniscient eye was charred, just a sooty socket now. Still she moved. Her hand reached inside the broken flaps of an internal storage compartment. Rowan looked closer, but it was too late.

An explosion from a phenohol grenade blew him back into the sand. The yellow gas had less punch, but it'd done its damage. Rowan fought the coma-cold, struggling to pull away. The fog drifted over the rift floor, eddying around small boulders as Asgard's ethereal winds pushed it. There was too much gas, he felt joints and tendons seize as his spine grew tight. Fumbling, he reached into his shielding.

There was nothing left, just small bits of glass stained purple, frozen to the interwoven wire of its mesh holder. The vial of antibody was broken. He shook it, hoping there might be some residue. Nothing. Rowan propped himself up. The crescent limb of Povinis faded with the planet-shadow.

God had no sense of irony it seemed. There'd be no salvation for Islanders by the Black Horseman himself. Words, from the rusty pipeline of a history fell into his slowing synapses.

"...Our bodies shall find native graves ...buried in your dunghills ...shall breed a plague... break out into a second course of mischief ...killing in relapse of mortality."

As eternal sleep sunk its teeth deep, thought became unmoored. Paradise, but not the baroque cloudscapes of salvation. Rowan's mind drifted into the quiet of ultramarine lagoons filled with breeze laden copra palms.

There was a man wading through the waves, above him, the crimson mote of another world. Its history would march on, Earth's empires lapping at its shores but failing to conquer it. It was now a question of sacrifice, birth, and rebirth. Would a whole people's apocalypse -the very end of their civilization on this red world- give life to

another so desperate? The answer did not lay with Rowan. It never had.

"Wake up, Vidar Amundsen," Rowan mouthed the words. "Wake up Torstein."

NOVA BYZANTIUM

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[NB] SUMMARY

After the massive climatic upheaval of the Post-Industrial Shock, pockets of civilization—and the not-so-civilized—survive in a new Dark Age. Nova Byzantium, the world's last empire, struggles to push back those they consider barbarians from its borders. The empire contracts with the militarized city-state of Tiraspol, hiring its Alkonost mercenaries to defend its territory and interests.

Above this terrestrial chaos, in the orbital city of Al Fadah Madina, the Islamic caliphate attempts to preserve mankind's intellectual heritage and maintain humanity's scholarly endeavor. To accomplish its ends, the celestial sheikhdom requires the services of "archivists"—agents who scour the dying Earth and collect technological artifacts for preservation and study. A former Alkonost mercenary, Uri Vitko, is one of their best archivists—at least as long as he can manage to please the caliphate, avoid the empire, and stay alive...

[NB] QUOTE

"He brings the living out of the dead and brings the dead out of the living and brings to life the earth after its lifelessness..."

-Qu'ran, Sura of the

Byzantines 30:19

[NB] REJECTIONS

Evan, thanks so much for sending this along. It's a pass for me but I truly appreciate the submission! Thanks again.

-Thomas Dunne Books

Many thanks for sending us Matthew's Nova Byzantium for consideration, and I'm sorry it has taken us so long to respond. After careful consideration, I'm sorry to tell you that we won't be taking this one further. It had some interesting characters, but ultimately it just didn't grab us. Sometimes that's all it takes. One thing I would perhaps take an additional look at is the number of descriptors in the MS. Nouns almost always seem to be accompanied by an adjective, which gives the piece the feel of being a little over-written. Sometimes it's ok to just call a plate, a plate. I'd like to take this opportunity to wish you the best of luck in placing it elsewhere.

-Angry Robot

I haven't but I gave it to my reader. Just asked her opinion and she was struggling with it and felt it had problems with character. I'm afraid that means it's not for us. Hope you understand and good luck.

-Pyr

Thanks for sending NOVA BYZANTIUM. This was definitely an interesting read but I'm afraid I have to pass at this time. Mr. Rivett is clearly a talented writer and the world he constructs is an interesting and appealing one. Unfortunately, I also found it a bit confusing and hard to follow the thread of the action. I think this kind of action oriented SF is a fairly tough corner of the market right now and it takes a lot for a new series to distinguish itself. In the end, I felt that this one falls slightly short of that mark. Thanks again for sending. I'm sure another editor will have the necessary enthusiasm to publish this and publish it well. Best of luck moving forward on this project.

-Orbit

Apologies for the delay in responding, and thank you so much for sending NOVA BYZANTIUM. I appreciate the opportunity to see it, and I'm sorry to say this doesn't seem right for us. It's an interesting idea, but I'm afraid I wasn't caring about the characters the way I'd want to, and so the story ended up feeling dry to me. I hope you will find a good home for this with another publisher, and thank you again for thinking of me.

-ACE

Thanks again for your extreme patience and for send me NOVA BYZANTIUM. There was a lot I liked about this, but in the end I'm going to pass. I think Rivett is a talented and promising author, but for me the world building wasn't as fully developed as it need to be to bring the post apocalyptic scenario alive. There are a lot of very cool aspects of the story (the idea of archivists, Al Fadah Madina, the Kali mask etc.), but too much of this world was unclear to really give a strong enough sense of time and place. I'm not sure it would help to detail every single aspect, but inner workings and interactions between the various groups aren't shown in a way that really fully gives them depth. There are some wonderful atmospheric moments that give us a glimpse into this new Dark Age, but it isn't consistent enough. Also, Uri and Sava have the beginnings of good characters, but they come across underdeveloped and at times flat. By contrast the moments where Rivett writes about something technological are inventive and wonderfully drawn, but the people in the story sometimes suffer from the contrast.

-Avon

[NB] CHAPTER ONE

July 2163 C.E.

Uri propped the bipod on a railing of the India Tower and peered through the rifle's telescopic sight. The archivist had no target, the scope merely provided a better view of Mumbai's suffocating southern peninsula below. A dead zone had drifted in from the Deccan Plateau, carrying in the flashover remnants of an immense methane fog. Its vapor crawled through the city, asphyxiating any unprotected creature still at street level. The top floors of the city's skyscrapers provided sanctuary from the oxygen-starved murk, the miasma was too heavy to reach the upper stories.

Uri had taken refuge in the tower—once a four-star hotel—just north of the Colaba District. For a quarter ounce of gold, he'd rented the relatively safe space from the local Thuggee warlord: a few barricaded floors five hundred meters up equipped with a generator and water purifiers. An archivist, he spent most days reconnoitering, sifting through the city's remains for relics and artifacts. At night, when the streets seethed with desperation, the place provided an oasis from the bedlam below.

But he'd been there a month and the Kali phansigars were growing suspicious. Uri knew if he lingered much longer, they would sniff out the archivist in their ranks. Known agents of Al Fadah Madina were regarded with hostility and suspicion. Mumbai could soon turn dangerous.

He took down the rifle, sat on the unmade bed, and sipped the last of his Laphroaig, a serendipitous acquisition from the ruins of hotel's bar. Fortunately for him, both the Thugees and the scavengers who had come before him had missed the single bottle of fifteen-year Scotch.

Uri pulled a box out from under the bed; symbols of Kali were inlaid on its surface in a mosaic of tropical hardwood. Inside lay an artifact of rare design, a ritual item the Thuggees used in their dark ceremonies: an elaborate "mask" resembling a desiccated cephalopod stranded by high tide. A set of ten notional arms, no doubt a reference to the Dark Mother's Mahakali form, radiated from the translucent cerulean "face." Blazing red eyes and small black lips completed it. This mask must mean something special to the Thuggees who saw Kali as their protector. Underneath was a set of tea compacted into domino-sized bars with what appeared to be Sanskrit writing on each. Were they used with hot water to marinate... clean... make an offering to the mask? Who knew?

The object's bounty was paltry in exchange for the risks Uri took to pilfer it. Insinuating himself into the Thuggee cult—masters of deception themselves—was an ordeal he did not wish to repeat. To do business, he had aided the brutes on one of their raids—an ambush of a local rival clan. Posing as a gun for hire was no problem for Uri, but concealing his identity from Kali's disciples had proved challenging. An archivist—many would term him a thief—hiding among thieves was not as simple as he had envisioned.

Now he was running on borrowed time; the phansigars would soon discover their object had been stolen from the temple and, as a stranger, he

would be swiftly suspect. They'd be after him soon, garrotes at the ready.

Uri slipped his console from his pocket and scrolled through his communiqués from the caliphate, safely orbiting above the ruin of Earth. There was no name associated with this particular procurement request—a fetishist perhaps? Despite their piety, Al Fadah Madina was known to harbor a few hedonists. The sheikhdom's love for the world's rapidly diminishing Cognac was proof enough of that.

Taking a closer look at the mask, small intricate patterns emerged from its cartilaginous skin. The object possessed a technology Uri recognized but couldn't place. Small geometrical webs of articulated hydraulics spiraled from its red eyes like a tangle of nerve fibers. Held to the light, the web of circuitry permeated the translucent artifact. He could see why the Al' Madina sheikhs might want it. The mask was a rare example of fractal bioengineering—grown not fabricated.

Uri closed the wooden box, slid it into his backpack, and checked his console again. He needed to get moving. After receiving his last transmission, Al Fadah Madina started readying a logistical drop. Touchdown was somewhere off the coast, seventy-five kilometers. Uri had already hired a dhow to bring him to the intercept point, and the boat would be waiting at the Gateway of India in a few hours.

He folded his rifle and activated his enrichment hood, a bellowed mask capable of filtering and collecting oxygen in jowl-like bladders. With carbon dioxide partial pressures measuring above critical threshold on the streets below, he'd need

the headgear to make it the few kilometers to the boat.

From the penthouse deck, Uri surveyed the listless metropolis one last time. The sun's iodine rays struggled to penetrate the atmospheric turmoil. Like a cypress swamp, the inversion layer lapped at the skyline's base. The archivist plotted his route: a quick jaunt down Marine Drive, east past Nariman Point, beyond the long abandoned arabesque of the Maharashtra police station, and then Mumbai Harbor, where—he hoped—the dhow would be waiting.

Nothing moved. The jaundiced city was a primordial morass, inching backward towards the Triassic. Its misery was Uri's fortune, however, the city's fetid avenues too anemic to molest a lone archivist.

#

Street level was a grueling ordeal, gripped by a feverous heat. Uri adjusted his enrichment hood and checked his console, five more kilometers until the rendezvous. He walked slowly, trying to avoid taxing the bellows of his overused filters. Anything faster would exhaust his reservoirs, choking him.

Marine Drive skirted the Indian Ocean, the ragged shoreline a tumult of heaped asphalt, rank seawater, and withered toddy palm. His route took him past the decay of once-beautiful apartment towers and boutiques, their swollen facades sagging with watery weight.

Uri checked his console again. The oxygen level read fifteen percent, too low for human beings but adequate for seabirds. They swirled the eddying murk hunting for weakened vermin. Crossing a flooded intersection, choked with rusted Fiat

taxis, he stumbled over the rotting husk of an oil palm. There was something fleshy commingled with the pulpy decay. Leaning in to inspect, Uri realized he'd stepped on a body, its flesh a pale blue. The Thuggee corpse was relatively fresh, brought down by the creeping anoxia. The promise of an empty city had been fatally seductive.

He trudged through Narimar Point.

A pathetic Gandhi gazed down at him, bronze eyes silently observing his slog through the overgrown park. Mumbai was not going to give him up easily. The turbocharged atmosphere, thick with carbon dioxide, gave the plants an otherworldly gigantism. The Colaba District was impenetrable jungle, putrid and overrun with waterweeds. The once-ubiquitous rain trees and banyans were dying, the hyacinth smothering their waterlogged roots.

Uncomfortable in the dense, claustrophobic air, Uri tugged at his fatigues, the wet filth they'd accumulated itching his skin. He longed for cooler landscapes, the lush pastures and percolating lakes of his Transnistrian homeland. It had been eons since he had been there; those days now felt like injected memories, someone else's life abandoned and unclaimed.

His console beeped.

He stopped in front of the gutted Prince of Wales Museum to read his communiqués. Al' Madina was transmitting the orbiting pod's inbound trajectory: splashdown estimate was in fifty hours. Uri hoped the offshore winds would hold. Time was short and he didn't have the gold reserves to pay the crew extra to search for a drifting reentry pod.

Something moved at the edge of his peripheral vision.

Warily, Uri unfolded his rifle and panned the green decay. He heard a splash and a howl. Taking cover, he squatted near an overturned auto-rickshaw. The sound came from the entrance of a looted Bollywood theater. With a sigh, he lowered his rifle and relaxed. A dog splashed and struggled to stand up in the brackish water. Dumb, it fought for control as its metabolism succumbed to hypoxia. Uri approached and stared at the suffering animal. It panted relentlessly, the dog's chest pulsing frantically. Curious, he waved his hand over its clouded eyes. No reaction. The mongrel was blind. Uri cocked his rifle, dropped the muzzle, and fired. The purple blood mixed with the black water, swirling around his boots.

He slogged on.

Jutting from behind the ruins of a train station, Uri saw the Gateway of India's crumbling arch, and beyond, the hazy outline of Elephant Island. Once the pride of Mumbai, the Gateway's minarets and central dome were now reduced to heaps of yellow basalt, half-dissolved by atmospheric causticity. He trudged over to the submerged parapets, marking the former border of the city and the sea.

Moored to the harbor's creosoted pilings was the dhow. The baghlah was rigged for the open ocean, and he had been assured the crew was competent. He peered through his rifle's sighting scope to inspect the boat. A few crewmembers milled about on deck, clad in water-stained dhotis, oversized enrichment hoods over their heads. Uri noticed something odd: their movements were lurching and uncoordinated, almost childlike, lacking fluidity.

One of the Thuggee's Kali lieutenants had set up the rendezvous, and Uri was wary, but he'd had few

options. Sheikh Sayyid had ordered this detour prior to his journey back to Soqotra. It was a procurement of high importance, more so than the typical scientific data cartridges, museum artifacts, and other odd luxuries he was sent to fetch. In fact, it was so important the dispatch coordinators were willing to double his gold stipend.

Uri pulled a magnesium cartridge from his webbing, loaded it onto the rifle muzzle, and pulled the trigger.

The flare traced a magenta arc over the glassy water catching the attention of the juvenile crew. A belch of oil smoke burped from the boat's clunky diesel as it came about. Pacing the crumbled dock, Uri waved them down. He folded and slung the rifle, careful to look as unthreatening as possible. Parley was an archivist's currency, every new encounter a potential powder keg.

Khalid introduced himself as the dhow's captain. Uri guessed he was about thirty—his sun-worn skin, gold teeth, and gray hair betrayed his age. His crew was composed of adolescents, hardscrabble orphans scarred by the trauma of a dying world. Rishi, the first mate, showed Uri to his cramped cabin. A concentrator labored to oxygenate the small space, allowing him to remove his sour enrichment hood.

Exhausted, Uri laid down on the bunk's thin mattress, the gentle roll of the waves lulling him. Lingering in the doorway, Rishi cleared his throat. Eyelids heavy, Uri raised himself on his elbow and reached into his pocket, pulling out two cigarettes. He lit them both, handing one to the boy. Rishi took the cigarette and handed Uri a sealed bottle of purified water in exchange.

"Two ounces for the crossing." The boy held out his grimy palm.

"I was told one and a half. That was the deal; it was prearranged."

"There's been added costs," Rishi shook his head firmly.

Uri paused, then exhaled slowly. "All right, if that's how it has to be."

The boy nodded.

Uri pulled out his console and scrolled through the communiqués. Decrypting the code, he wrote down the latitude and longitude for the logistical drop and handed it to the boy along with the ingots. Rishi shut the teak hatch, leaving Uri alone.

The dhow crept out of Mumbai Harbor and into the Arabian Sea. The monsoon winds picked up, pushing the dead zone's anoxia landward and away. Uri pried at the corroded hinge and opened his porthole. He filled his lungs with the fresh air and lay back down. Idle thoughts drifted through his exhausted mind, reflections on Mumbai and origins of the Thuggee's mask.

Why did the sheikhs want such a thing, whatever it was? He knew Al Fadah Medina's eccentricities, the bored sheikhs and their ability to afford strange luxuries, but this... Despite their fanaticism, the cultists were incapable of such a sophisticated design; the artifact was of a foreign, possibly imperial, manufacture.

Curious, Uri sat up and pulled the box from his rucksack. He removed the object and admired the ethereal craftsmanship. The pupil-free eyes gazed at him from the disembodied head of the black Durga, haloed by its crown of symbolic arms. The face was both mesmerizing and maddening. The tea-

bars were black and chalk-like. Sanskrit, of which Uri was illiterate, labeled the bars. Sated, he put the box back in his satchel and fell asleep.

#

Uri woke to a commotion on deck. Rishi knocked on his door then led him outside. The flicker of Al Fadah Madina's celestial necklace filled the night sky, a swath of shimmer dappled with starlight. Khalid switched on a flood lamp, illuminating the cobalt waves with its ghostly cone. Uri toggled the orbital receiver's beacon. They were close, maybe a few hundred meters from the transponder. One of the boys shouted and pointed starboard. The lamp swung to highlight the pod's deflated parachute. Fishing it from the sea, Khalid heaved the keg-sized capsule on deck, blackened and streaked from reentry. The crew huddled around as Uri broke the seal and inspected the contents.

The payload was a standard logistical cache, insta-paks, fresh hood filters, ammunition, and cadmium-polymer batteries. He cracked a hermetic pack and retrieved a memory stick, along with the stack of flat quarter-ounce gold ingots. He popped the data cartridge into his orbital console and pressed his thumb into the ID scanner. Double-layer encryption, Sheikh Sayyid and Al' Madina's specialists were taking no chances. This procurement was redlined.

"Diego Garcia, fifteen hundred kilometers from here, south of the Maldives. You and your crew will be paid ten ounces of bullion via drop, an additional twenty if you take me back to Soqotra," Uri said.

"Why, archivist?" Khalid asked. "Who is this Diego?"

"Diego Garcia's not a man, it's a place."

"Probably far-flung and dangerous," Khalid said slyly. "We need to renegotiate the price."

"It's not negotiable. Take it or leave it," Uri replied.

Khalid paused then spoke. "What if we leave you?"

He was at Khalid's mercy. The crew knew Uri was an archivist. Anonymity no longer shielded him. If the Thuggees had gotten word to Khalid about their missing mask, Uri would be debris in the ocean's briny current. Reading the encrypted mission order, he was to recover a derelict warhead from the atoll's ruined airbase. Once retrieved, Uri was to make for Burj Babil on the Arabian island of Soqotra.

"I'll see what can be done," Uri replied calmly. "I'll try to connect to dispatch and renegotiate. Sayyid's encryptor is slow; it'll take time."

That seemed to be enough to pacify the captain. The crew raised the sails and tacked southward. With a sigh, Uri reached into the pod and handed out his cigarette rations to Khalid and the boys as a sign of good faith.

#

Khalid was a decent navigator and accepted an only slightly outrageous fee. With a quick stopover in the Maldives for salvage, the dhow made it to the abandoned airbase after fifteen uneventful days.

Uri located the designated aircraft. He found a package of glow sticks in the plane's survival kit and strung them like holiday lights inside the bomb bay. The vehicle's batteries were too old to jury-rig, and he needed light to work. Out of the five sub-orbital bombers on base, only one

remained intact. This was the objective the sheikdom was after. The bomber possessed two hypersonic missiles, both nuclear armed, bolted to hydraulic deployment arms.

Along with the warheads, he salvaged an ejection system from the bombardier's station, the release cords and climate control still intact. The fully functional pressure suit-helmet, high altitude chute, and heat shielding—was designed to protect pilots in a Mach 10 jet wash. With any luck he'd be able to barter it in Al Fadah Madina.

He managed to find a tool chest in a rusted Quonset and was close to extricating the warhead from the missile chassis. The fusing batteries were a delicate maneuver, and Sayyid's schematics were cryptic. One misplaced clamp and the cells would short and melt, heating the weapon housing like a blast oven. Using parachute cord and tie-straps, he built a makeshift block and tackle to manhandle the awkward payload. After a day spent in the stuffy fuselage extricating the payload, he gently swung the warheads from the bay and lowered them down through the pried-open drop doors into the boat below.

The surging ocean had inundated the airfield's tarmac, transforming it into a stagnant estuary overrun with strangler fig and mangrove. The monsoons kept the flies and mosquitoes subdued, but the humid heat made modest exertion misery. Uri ripped open a freshwater pouch and slurped it down, then untied the inflatable raft from the bomber's crumpled landing strut.

The dhow was anchored in Diego Garcia's lagoon, patiently waiting for his return... or so Uri hoped. The gold paid for Uri's passage to Diego Garcia but not a work crew. He'd propositioned the boys

for a few quarter ingots, but Khalid would have none of it. Despite a cyclone predicted for the equatorial belts, the dhow's captain was in no rush to speed Uri's salvage.

As the sun set, he walked the raft through the flooded jungle. Most of the atoll was in the process of reclamation by the Indian Ocean's swollen seas. A few places not yet by salinity, like the old military barracks and naval terminals, remained flush with the native ironwood and copra palms.

Due to Diego Garcia's remoteness—just a pinprick of sand in the vast gyre—the island had avoided pillage. He found it remarkable, considering the abundant salvage. The military installation was littered with capable military weaponry. Such overwrought firepower in the hands of the world's fractured fiefdoms and barbarian warlords was sobering. Al Fadah Madina was doing mankind a favor, in a way. The last thing the battered world needed was access to one of its deadliest weapons.

Tying the neoprene raft to a radio shack, Uri climbed a microwave tower. A cloud of fruit bats erupted from the nearby jungle—small creatures, just hearty enough to subsist on the atoll's shriveled guava and mango. He unfolded his rifle and panned the twilight with the night scope. Through the evening mist, he saw the dhow's lateen heading for the lagoon's northern pass.

Uri checked the time, 19:00. They were supposed to meet him for pick-up; that was the plan at least. Zooming in, he hovered the crosshair's faint glow over the target. The crew was frantically winching the sail, attempting a lethargic beat towards the outer reef. His raft had no outboard engine and no oars—even if it had,

the warheads' weight made catching the dhow impossible.

"Fucking Thuggees."

During his daylong expedition exploring Diego Garcia's scrap heaps, Uri had apparently missed the logistical pod's splashdown. The dhow crew must have retrieved the capsule along with the ten ounces of gold payment. Khalid, deciding the archivist a diminishing investment, abandoned him to an island fate.

Uri took a few moments to gain his wits.

He loaded a high-powered round into the chamber and popped the bipod. After a few careful breaths, he fired a warning shot, barking the boat's wood hull. The adolescent crew scrambled for cover, eyes wide as they searched the shore's shadows for muzzle flash. Honing his aim, Uri targeted Khalid as he manned the tiller. He let loose a three round burst and watched the man grab for his leg, a red trickle staining the hem of his dhoti. Another shot went through the top of his foot. Khalid fell and slithered behind a rain barrel. Rishi took over the tiller and throttled up the rattling diesel. The crosshairs hovered over the boy's head. Uri wiped the sweat from his eyes and concentrated.

He fingered the trigger but didn't squeeze it. An acidic burp lapped at his lips. He was losing focus. Archivists' lethal reputations preceded them, and Khalid should've known retribution would be swift. But now, with the enemy in his sights, Uri found himself incapable of finishing them. The kill switch of his clinical detachment—the engines of a mercenary heart—was broken, poisoned by revelation. The ruthless conditioning of his former life was a wound unhealed. Empathy,

perceived as a liability, was no longer the sin it once was.

He pulled away from the telescopic sight and folded the rifle. Uri had other alternatives for getting home, however unappealing.

#

The Cyclone was dry-docked. With a few well-placed 7.62mm's to the sponsons, the rusted scaffold sank into the lagoon's squalor. Getting the diesels started was another matter. Two of its three Velentas were still functional. Freshly installed prior to the abandonment of Diego Garcia, the engines remained wrapped in factory plastic. Scrounging enough coolant, fuel, and oil was another matter.

After a sweltering week, Uri managed to prep the vehicle for the Soqotra crossing, a trip of nineteen hundred kilometers to the northwest. He felt at home foraging through the rusted detritus and swamped outposts of the world's forgotten empires; the archivist's element. Unfortunately, Khalid had taken the entirety of the logistical drop, leaving him nothing but fish and breadfruit on which to subsist. A few weeks on the open ocean would be a digestive tribulation, but he was no stranger to survivorship.

He recalled a miserable winter in Dagestan as an Alkonost mercenary—no vodka, no food, and no gold for barter. Nova Byzantium's contract was underfunded, and Tiraspol was unwilling to subsidize their raggedy deployment. Deer hunting, theft, and scrounging were the only things that had kept him and his platoon alive. Uri knew parasitic existence all too well.

The warheads, with some maneuvering and patience, came to rest in the boat's waterline

weapons bay through a hatch designed for commando teams. Uri only had to flood the bilge and push the small inflatable inside. A few nylon straps and the nuclear loads were ready for their transoceanic voyage. The Cyclone was more vessel than Uri could conceivably manage, but he didn't have the fuel to throttle the aluminum ship's forty-five meters to full speed, regardless.

On a weather-free morning, he idled the patrol boat out of the disintegrating harbor. The lagoon was a ship's graveyard, the scuttled flotilla reaching out from its watery tomb like ghouls clawing through rotted earth. Uri took one last look at the fading atoll then headed out past the outer reef and into the open ocean.

[NB] CHAPTER TWO
November, 2163 C.E.

A breach of contract resulted in the desperate crisis facing the citizens of Kharkivschyna. Tiraspol underestimated the cost of Operation Allied Saint, forcing Alkonost to pull their brigades from the province's eastern regions. Word of this leaked onto the streets of Kharkov and a mob assembled outside the gates of Morozov's biologics institute. Nobody blamed them; Kharkivschyna's citizens had been left to the mercy of the steppe hordes, their besieged viceroy impotent to stop the invaders.

The mercenary's arrival wasn't the clandestine operation they'd hoped, but this place—this site—was their last resort. Lieutenant Sava Valis and his squad were forced to land the Hind gunships inside the institute's barricaded compound, a short pitch from Lenin Prospect. Morozov was the only corporation in Nova Byzantium capable of advanced anabolic prototyping. The secret lab allowed Morosov to work gray market projects free of imperial meddling. With no questions asked, it was perfect for customers needing a low profile.

Working as a fixer and nothing more, Sava had set up a contact between Alkonost's Intelligence and Interrogation division and Morosov. He'd dealt with the corporation on previous occasions, trial testing and deploying experimental technology used for prisoner interrogations. The Alkonost client wanted to remain anonymous, however—anonymous even to those carrying out the mission, including Sava.

Sava bribed a few administrators to ferret out the contract number, but nothing turned up. Someone had paid to subvert Tiraspol's well-guarded nepotism.

The Hind gunships flew in under cover of night. The surgical procedure was supposed to take twenty-four hours, but there were complications. Sava's immune system was rejecting the treatment, and the high-dose compound of antihistamine-laced-Phenobarbital had put him into a coma. Sava was now slowly coming around, having lost a day to unconsciousness.

The fluorescent lamps pulsed with his fluttering eyelids. Thuds of muffled violence and the soft clink of surgical instruments confused him. His forearms remained tightly strapped to the crucifix-shaped operating table, his veins inexpertly accessed by technicians who administered the last of the binding agent through cloudy tubing. The operating room was filthy, the place reeked of mold and decay.

This procedure was a mandate under the mission contract; the client demanded it. The job specs gave Sava pause, but work was tight with Nova Byzantium's recent insolvency. He'd posted sentinel duty before, but never where the consignment was so potentially lethal. Command mentioned a biological component, a viral contagion capable of infecting the crew. The questionable procedure was supposed to inoculate against would-be pathogens; at least that's what they told him.

A few more ragged sutures, and the procedure was complete.

Morosov's techs helped him into a wheelchair and parked him in one of the institute's recovery

bays. Mach, his specialist, stood watch over him. Sava struggled to stand but was overwhelmed by nausea. An ocean of fiery prickles swarmed his joints, the inflammation a visible network of redness just under the skin. A belch of vomit dribbled from his chin onto his feet as he staggered. Mach leapt in to shoulder him.

"You've got to stand," Mach begged. "Time to evacuate. The gendarmes aren't going to be able to hold back the riot. They brought a few armored personnel carriers, but..."

Sava limped to a sooty window and peered through the grime. Kharkov's western outskirts were burning, a slow forest fire fueled by methane exhaled from the distant thaw of northern tundra. The blaze had consumed so much oxygen it now only smoldered, engulfing Kharkov in a blizzard of ash.

"Can we take off?" Sava wondered, wincing as he buttoned his gray fatigues.

"I think so. We can boost the manifold with the enricher. Not much 'oh-two' left in the tanks though. It's going to be tight."

"Did you say something about APCs?" Sava's voice was hoarse from the intubation.

"Yeah. The provincial gendarmes, they're protecting the institute," Mach replied, his brow furrowed.

"Not anymore. Look."

They both looked out the window towards the main gate. The paramilitaries were gone, abandoning the Morosov lab to the riot. Sava didn't blame them; the audacity to show up in Kharkov after Alkonost's retreat months before was insulting. The city's angry denizens filled Freedom Square like swarming ants, pushing and pulling at the institute's iron gate. It wouldn't take long for

the crowd to squeeze into the poorly defended compound.

"Shit, they've got molotovs."

"The helicopters," croaked Sava.

The Mi-24s sat exposed to the mob's provisional missiles. Alkonost mercenaries flanked the idle machines, firing warning shots. Undeterred, the throng grew more enraged. Broken pieces of concrete sailed over the barricade, a few striking the gunships' cockpits and rotor housings.

"We need to get the hell out of here."

"Time for dust-off. Get everyone downstairs."

Still recovering from their own procedures, the squads were weak and impaired. Sava fumbled with his rifle as he headed outside and climbed into the Hind's crew bay. The helicopters' droopy blades disappeared as the slow whoops faded to a rhythmic clap, the vibration amplifying Sava's queasiness. Closing his eyes, he tried to focus, but his skin burned and itched with every jostle. Shuddering, he wished he could molt and slither out of his skin.

The pilot radioed back to the crew. The turboshaft's carburetor was struggling, its air filters clogged with cinders. Oxygen levels were too low. For a few agonizing moments, they waited as the pilot blew the intake vents, until at last the Hind wobbled into the air.

Two of the three helicopters floated up through the ash, but the third Hind failed to liftoff. Through the murk, Sava saw the flicker of Molotovs flying over the gate, spreading fire over the tarmac like molten rain. The Kharkovian mob coalesced into a fleshy battering ram and crashed into the compound. The horde quickly ripped apart the idling helicopter and set the vehicle ablaze.

From above, those airborne watched helplessly in horror as their comrades clambered from the vehicle to escape immolation only to be truncheoned by the awaiting mob.

The two surviving Mi-24s hovered over Schevchenko Park, the forward gunners itchy for revenge. Sava ordered them to hold fire. Mach looked at him, eyes filled with melancholy. Wasting a fusillade of rockets and Yak rounds on civilians was not in their best interest, despite the catharsis. Painfully, Sava ordered the pilots to circle and head out.

Popping another antihistamine, he took a swig from his canteen and looked down at the bedlam below. Their route took them over smoking landscapes, dissolving forest steppe churned by industrial decay and meteorological rage. The vehicle hugged the terrain, the atmosphere too exhausted for high-altitude combustion. He poured water over his throbbing forearms and felt fleeting relief. Glancing at his squad, he noticed a faint, irregularly shaped rash emerging on the jaws and foreheads of the men.

"Three hours until Kalinigrad. The Antonov is refueling now. Wilco's got East Anglia on VHF. Command's wondering about crew status," Mach said, tapping his earpiece.

"Crew status... functional."

"But what about the contract? They'll have to contact the client."

"Let them," Sava shrugged.

"So what're we going to tell them?"

"Tell them the mission is not compromised. We'll be able to fulfill our contract with the assets available."

Mach shook his head in doubt.

"It's sentinel duty, Mach, on a rock in the middle of the ocean, a thousand kilometers from nowhere. Who do you think's going to attack us?"

Mach shrugged.

The clouds of ash coiled around the rotor blades and flowed into the crew compartment, stinging eyes and shredding lungs. Unable to bear the post-operative pain, Sava broke open a med pack for its morphine. He slid the syringe in between the ragged stitches, closed his eyes, and pinched its liquid bubble.

Relief was instant.

Disembodied, he drifted outside and shadowed the Hind's thumping blades. A ghostly vision penetrated what he perceived as a temporal fog. Over the time horizon, he saw an undersea arcade filled with statues arranged in a circle. Ultramarine lights danced in the benthic arcade's central brazier. Faces of chiseled marble gazed into the drowned fire, mesmerized. A lost civilization ...Atlantis ? Sava was unsure. Awaiting rebirth, the revenants huddled to preserve the light.

With a turbulent shudder, Sava felt the tear of nylon straps cut into his shoulder. The vision was gone. He sat up, tracers blurring the world's drab. Remnants of the drug's effect clung to his eyelids. A recruit fidgeted with his rifle next to him. Sava opened his mouth to confess his revelation but held back.

The recruit, a young man named Yakiv, spoke instead. "Where's this place, sir? The contract location."

"Jan Mayen," Sava slurred. "It's an island."

"What's there? What're we defending?"

"Nothing. Everything. I don't know."

[NB] CHAPTER THREE

August 2163 C.E.

Burnt sunlight filled the transom, illuminating the diwan with dappled rainbows. Uri opened the shutters then knelt to light coals under the large floor hookah. Outside, a goat herder meandered through a grove of dragon blood and bulging bottle trees. Life here continued much as it had since the time of Mohammed. The Island of Soqotra provided an oasis from the chaos of the Post-Industrial Shock. Uri's apartment was spacious but Spartan. The traditional Yemeni tower houses Al' Madina's archivists shared were seldom occupied. He relaxed on a pile of floor cushions and chewed Qat leaf.

Uri hadn't slept much the past few weeks. The voyage from Diego Garcia left him drained: a combination of dehydration, poor nutrition, and sleep deprivation. To conserve fuel, he'd throttled back to an achingly slow cruising speed. Most of the boat's batteries were dead and no longer rechargeable; piloting the craft was a tedious but exhausting manual affair. Soon, Uri would escort the procurement up the Burj Babil to Al Fadah Madina's nexus where he'd receive final payment, as was archivist custom.

It would soon be dark, but Uri was not yet ready for sleep. His thoughts drifted to the enigmatic mask he'd brought from Mumbai. The Qat's cathinone was kicking in and his curiosity swelled. Overcome by the urge to indulge it, he filled a silver teapot with hot water, broke one of the tea bars apart, and let the crumpled remnants dissolve. A

sweet, earthen aroma filled the diwan. Pouring the infusion into a ceramic bowl, an oily sheen formed in the russet liquid.

Uri plopped the mask into the tea mixture and watched it distend, the Mahakali's arms waving and contorting. His guess was right. The artifact needed liquid to activate its bioengineered hydraulic "muscles." It looked alive, its arms pantomiming Kali's deadly dance. The motion pulsed in a mesmerizing and lulling rhythm.

Uri poured himself a cup of the tea and took a sip. It filled his chest with a smooth burn, a slow fire that spread from his spine into his brain. Numbed, he reclined on a pillow and focused on the sun's golden disc as it crawled into the crags of the Haghier Mountains. He picked up the writhing mask and held it near his face. Its ten arms sensed the warmth of his skin and reached out to him. Ruby irises glowed brightly and pulsed hypnotically.

Unafraid, Uri donned the Thuggee mask and let its slimy hydrostats embrace his chin, cheeks, and forehead. The arms of the strange bio-machine throbbed with an electric heat. His synapses were alight as a psychic interface opened pathways into his cloudy cranium. With remote detachment, his paralyzed body fell away. The mask's crimson glare merged with his own vision, and another world opened inside a disembodied reality, a new dimension alien yet familiar.

Uri looked around.

He was in the Caucasus Mountains. The range's sharp peaks towered above a village of bleached buildings and onion-shaped domes. A sign in Cyrillic declared Tindi to be free of vice. With hands tied behind his back, he could barely move.

A vicious crowd surrounded him, snarling like a pack of wolves.

He felt small, physically. Looking down at his grimy feet, he saw a child's toes wiggling in sandals. Next to him, he heard the shriek of a pre-adolescent girl. He glanced in her direction. Tears streaked the girl's dusty cheeks, hair knotted by layers of filth. Behind he saw two pits, freshly dug by old men with leathery skin.

Uri was in the body of a child, a boy. Men and women, young and old, filled the square, jostling stones in their eager hands. This was a public stoning, and he was to be one half of the cruel spectacle. He screamed in Russian but was overwhelmed by the crowd's taunts. One of the grizzled men slipped a muslin bag over his upper body and cinched it tightly with a rope. The moldy cotton reeked of ammonia.

Someone pushed him. The boy stumbled helplessly backwards into the waist-high pit. Forceful hands stood him upright as the men shoveled rocky earth in and around his legs. The ground felt cold and constricting, until at last, warmth bled out from his crotch as he pissed himself. The girl wailed hysterically.

The crowd ceased their rabid antagonism. Quiet gave way to hollow thumps. The boy peered through the muslin's loose weave but saw only shadow. He heard another thud, then a sharp scream from the girl. The stones sailed in from all directions. Sharp edges tore away fabric as rocks bruised and battered his trunk. Each blow to the head rang his skull with blinding pain.

In agony, the boy let loose a throaty scream. He struggled, desperate to free his hands, but the cord cut deeper with every twist. More stones

smacked his temples. His forehead burned with skin peeling away from bone. He struggled but fell face-first to the ground. Blood poured into his eyes, blurring the world with crimson. He cocked his head and looked at the girl again. She was silent now; her head deformed by the barrage. She gazed through him with dead eyes.

Among the crowd, the Uri-part of his mind noticed four Alkonost mercenaries idly watching the spectacle. The soldiers were dressed in blue-gray fatigues, eyes sealed behind eyeshades and military head shrouds. They were under contract from Nova Byzantium to guard the interests of Dagestan's failing junta, Uri remembered. With a slim mandate, the platoon could do nothing but casually observe the Tindi execution.

Unknown to the mercenaries, Tiraspol's ill-fated operation would become an ordeal by winter. Malnourished and exhausted, they would wait endlessly for delinquent supply flights, the campaign one of attrition. Through the boy's dying eyes, Uri recognized one of the mercenaries smoking a cigarillo, his head shaved and scarred-himself.

Uri always preferred the tightly rolled leaf to cigarettes; the smolder of seasoned Turkish tobacco was mellow, more urbane. The cigarillos always tasted better with good single malt. But procuring a decent bottle of Scotch in Dagestan was next to impossible.

Another rock flew in fast and hit its mark. A loud crack turned his boy-brain to static.

The mask released him.

Uri desperately gulped breath into his burning lungs. The terror was over; the liberation was so sharp and freeing, the euphoria was extraordinary.

Years spent roaming Central Asia had exposed him to a wild assortment of opium pleasures, but this was like nothing else. He struggled to embrace and sustain the experience, but the harrowing dreamscape slipped away like dust through his fingers.

Outside, the Soqotran sky glowed in swaths of green and gold as evening faded to twilight. Below, the goat herder watered his small flock near a palm-lined wadi. The incident had been brief, just a few minutes.

Color and smell took on enhanced dimensions, the tactile weave of the Persian carpets, the visual intricacies of the transoms' fretwork, and the smell of Frankincense... His eyes welled with emotion as the high continued. It was a clarity no narcotic could deliver. Life, in all its richness, engulfed him.

The mask fell limp. Uri carefully set it back inside the box and watched it contract and wilt. Beads of oily water condensed on its bruised-colored flesh, the miniscule hydraulics expelling their essence. Death had left its stain. Perhaps in sacrifice?

Was this the euphoria the sheikhs of the Al Fadah Madina sought, a high derived from vicarious death and resurrection? Uri was at a loss as to how the Thuggees had collected such a diabolic experience, let alone encapsulated it into the arcane engineering of the mask's viscera. Maybe they hadn't, perhaps the mask was just a catalyst for reliving wartime traumas. Uri could only speculate. It seemed unlikely that coincidence could be so finely choreographed.

Uri clearly recalled the Tindi stoning. He didn't need the shadowy world of the mask's

embrace to remind him of its horror. Though he witnessed it years ago, the incident's brutality still haunted him. He had a vague notion the stoning had something to do with a violation of tribal honor, or some such barbaric notion of justice. Much to Uri's shame, he'd done nothing to halt the atrocity. But, at the same time, he knew there had been nothing he, an outsider with no authority, could have done.

#

Uri slid his thumb over the reader and waited for the blue "go light." The wheeled sled clattered as he pushed it into Burj Babil's lift lobby. A sergeant greeted him and verified his procurement authorization. He knew the crew, ex-Alkonost and veterans of Moldova, now employed as Al Fadah Madina's paramilitaries. They exchanged pleasantries. Uri promised to keep his eyes peeled for Polish vodka on his next jaunt into the shambles of Western Europe.

The lift hummed like a droning viola, the monofilament spinning through the Burj's hulking concrete-iron anchor. Engineers checked the crate seals and scanned Uri's inventory list. The LED read "classified." Their curiosity piqued, the guards whispered among themselves. Black shipments destined for Al Fadah Madina were rare. Uri relaxed on a sofa in the lounge, waiting for the next car to arrive. The lift engineer nodded in Uri's direction.

"Who ordered this procurement? Has it been vetted?"

"Sheikh Sayyid, check the courier paperwork. I assume it's cleared."

"Who is it for?" continued the lift engineer.

"Not sure, really. Regardless, I'm not at liberty to discuss it. But you knew that already." Former mercenaries were still hired guns, easily bribed. Information was always for sale, but Uri didn't feel like biting.

"Of course. Don't want us catching wind of what they're hoarding up there, eh? Worried the rats will start crawling up the anchor-line," the engineer joked, gazing up at the filament's endless hairline fracture.

"Demitri will be your escort," the lift sergeant spoke up, jerking his thumb towards a scowling lift guard.

Uri exchanged pleasantries as they walked up the loading ramp and stepped into the silvery pod. They strapped themselves into the cushioned high-G seats. The airlock sealed shut as the cabin lights flickered to life. The lift guard eyed the containers.

"Quite a consignment—whatever it is. This shipment's been redlined. What's in it?" Demitri asked.

Uri didn't answer.

The car's hydraulic clutch squeezed the supersonic monofilament. With a sharp grinding, the car jolted into the sky, beginning its twenty thousand kilometer ascent to the caliphate's orbital dominion.

"I asked you a question," Demitri persisted. "I need to know what's in the box."

"No you don't. It's classified; I told you that. Let it go."

"If I did let it go, I wouldn't be doing my job, would I? You could be sneaking a weapon up there."

"I'll promise you two bottles of the Crocovia to forget about it—I may've a bottle on Soqotra

even."

Demitri shook his head sternly.

"Don't make me, Demitri."

"Open it."

"You really don't want me to..."

"Open it!"

"All right, brother."

Uri got up from his seat and opened the electronic locks. Curiously, Demitri leaned forward for a closer look. His bloodshot eyes widened as Uri deftly removed his rifle from the box and aimed it at the guard's head.

"No firearms on the lift! Weapons are forbidden in Al' Madina," Demitri protested.

"This isn't for Al' Madina."

#

Guarding Demitri was exhausting. Uri hoped his captive would eventually relax. At one point, he even offered him a swig of his precious Johnny Walker, but the gesture was futile. Demitri was too uptight, answering Uri in one-word replies as he glanced nervously out the pod's sunshield. The seven-hour ordeal was more stressful than necessary.

Howls and barks greeted Uri when he arrived. The concourse pulsed with blue strobes, klaxons squealing. The sterile-white of the nexus geodesics were typically a warm welcome after hours spent in a sweaty lift pod. Not his time. A swarm of lift guards hovered inside the chamber's dodecahedron, eager to pounce. The unreturned radio-checks had triggered the alarm, but Uri was ready.

In haste, wayward cargo had been left to drift unsecured inside the concourse. Most of the exits were cordoned, the hornet-hash of the nexus

airlocks automatically sealed shut from the current unpleasantness. Uri motioned a weightless Demitri out of the car, letting him go. This wasn't a hostage situation; there was no need for Uri to escalate the crisis. The bulky mercenary bounced through tumbling crates as he flailed towards the geodesics' triangular walls.

"Stand down, archivist!"

Uri said nothing, panning his rifle from one bulky mercenary to the next. Like a murder of crows, they surrounded him on all sides, above and below, left and right, a spherical standoff.

The chamber's intercom hissed with muffled Arabic. Working the Burj Babil required fluency in the classical Koranic tongue, Al Fadah Madina's lingua franca. Uri never bothered to pick up the language's colloquial nuances. After dabbling in Turkish and Azeri, he'd limited his quotient of middle-eastern phraseology to one-word expletives. From the tone of the intercom's disembodied voice, Uri guessed it was a stand-down order.

"Sheikh Sayyid!" Uri called out.

"On his way, archivist."

Someone silenced the sirens. The anxious clamor gave way to quiet, the rhythmic hum of the Burj' filament lulling the belligerents. Uri relaxed his rifle grip and released the Kevlar straps used to bind him to the car floor, an attempt to avoid Newton's third law.

Al' Madina's "no weapons" rule—which Uri had violated in spectacular fashion—was in effect for a good reason. The colony's membrane-thin skin was easily penetrable by a rifle round. A pinprick, no matter how small, was capable of hemorrhaging the colony, siphoning off its air supply like a black hole. As a sign of good faith, Uri pulled the

magazine and ejected the chambered round, its brass twinkle cartwheeling into space. The guards followed, lowering their chemical weapons and holstering non-lethal pistols.

A wreath of vapor escaped from a pressure door as a hydraulic arm pushed it aside. Uri's agent floated at the threshold, his kafiya—specially designed for weightlessness—hovered around his head like a red-checkered halo. Sheikh Sayyid, like his caliphate brethren, wore the traditional white thobes of Old Arabia, the loose ankle-length garments somehow defied Al' Medina's weightlessness.

"Quite the entrance, Uri," the sheikh said at last. "But completely unnecessary."

"You left me strict instructions, Sayyid. No one was to interfere with the payload, absolutely no one. It was either this—" Uri patted then slung his rifle on his shoulder. "—or pull the break and head back down." He nodded at the silver lift pod. "Demitri was a little too curious on ascent, so I got nervous. Looks like I started a chain reaction, huh?"

"He was only doing his job, trying to protect us," Sayyid smiled. "You can trust them. They're Alkonost veterans like yourself, no?"

Uri smirked, "You don't know mercenaries very well, do you?"

"It's all right," said Sayyid, ignoring Uri to address the suspended guard swarm. "Uri is operating under my orders—please."

"There are two totes—your atomic playthings and my other commissions."

"Splendid. I'll have them delivered to my manzil. Please surrender your firearm to the lift

sergeant and we'll be on our way," Sayyid said, daintily gesticulating.

Uri handed over his Spetsnaz rifle to one of the guards and tried to shake the resulting nervous naked feeling.

Lift operators and load detail filtered back through pressure hatches to quickly resume their work, corralling and stowing the floating cargo. Freight specialists crawled into the lift car, unbuckled Uri's cargo, and brought it to Sayyid, the ordinary-looking totes betraying the world-ending objects within. The sheikh signaled to an assistant, and the warheads were quietly shuttled from the concourse.

Sayyid escorted Uri from the lift nexus to the toroidal hubs and corkscrew spindles of the orbital colony's truncated arc. Self-propelled hand-lines slinked through the heaving axle-works, providing locomotion. Uri and the sheikh navigated the topological interchanges like corpuscles pumping through twisted veins. They drifted through greenhouses filled with tethered islands of billowing green—large rounded spaces doubling as both park and garden. Bats sailed through the dim celestial forests, the mammals bizarrely adapted to the gravity-free disorientation.

Sayyid noticed Uri's gaze, "They grow fat here. They don't have to work as hard. Some just sleep in clusters suspended in space. It's beautiful."

They let go of the hand-lines and drifted down to a nearby platform, a polished geometric oasis in the twilight of tangled terrariums. The sign above the portal was in Arabic. Uri assumed it read "Azraq Hawat," the name of the sheikh's home toroid. Inside, an elevator awaited them. Uri felt the mock gravity push him into the seat as the

elevator crawled out along the hawat's spokes. Sayyid explained the ride would take a few minutes, deliberately slow as to not jar its occupants.

Arriving at a small lobby, Uri peered up through a blister dome and gazed at Al Fadah Madina's panorama. Its intricate, yet massive wheels rotated about the centrifugal hubs as mite-like maintenance spacecraft lingered. Beyond, the setting sun suffused the Earth's murk with a vaporous limb, a sickly brushstroke marking the end of another celestial day.

Uri hadn't been to the Sayyid's office before, let alone his manzil. Like most of the princes' domiciles, his spacious salon was furnished in Old Arabian fashion. His family was originally from Jeddah's Al'Balad District, and much of the room was a reproduction of the old city's interiors. A recreation of the classic Jeddah mushrabiyahs lined a long wall, intricate lattice-covered wood windows filtering synthetic light from places unseen. Uri inhaled deeply: frankincense, a soothing aroma and welcome departure from the clinical smells of the toroid hubs.

Sayyid invited him to sit. Uri slumped back into the satiny cushions of the floor pillows, indulging in the orbital comfort. A servant entered carrying a dallah and two small cups on a silver tray. Setting it on a low table, he tipped the long-necked Arabic coffee pot and poured them both a small cup of the cardamom-infused beverage. Uri took a sip and closed his eyes.

Sayyid spoke at last, waking Uri from a catnap. "As-salaamu alaikum, my friend—a formal welcome. I apologize for the confusion. My orders were too

strict—but it is such an important consignment. You understand.”

“ Wa alaikum as-salaam,” responded Uri in kind. “Bandwidth’s cheap. Your communiqués are ambiguously brief. I’m sure you have your reasons, but...”

The sheikh leapt up and crossed the salon to a large antiquated machine typical of Al’ Madina’s technological artifacts. Suddenly animated, he explained it was a working PDP-8, an early commercial minicomputer; its Teletype keys and paper-tape readers tricked by holographic data crystals and neural taps. Sayyid projected the computer’s clumsy text onto a wall display and scrolled through pixilated Arabic. The crude machine was the hub for Sayyid’s dispatches to all terrestrial archivists under his employ, messages logged and transmitted archaically.

“You see, the 12-bit processor and 32 kilobytes of memory take time to encrypt even a small message.”

“I’m painfully aware,” Uri sighed.

The sheikhs, in their insular world, thrived on Earth’s vestigial scientific pursuits. Their monastic obsessions had led them to an Islamic renaissance not seen since the centuries succeeding the Prophet’s revelations. Sayyid described it as a “jihad” and a holy duty, jokingly calling it Islam’s sixth pillar. Uri was unenlightened.

On Earth, the caliphate was the custodian of Mecca, a duty inherited after Nova Byzantium’s failed invasion of the Hormuz Emirates. Besides the island of Soqotra—the base of Burj Babil—the Holy City was the limit of the sheikhdom’s on-world territory. Sayyid had made the requisite

Hajj to the Holy Mosque but once, his only descent down the Burj. His complexion was unblemished and free of Earth's causticity, eyes lacking the bleached squinty stare. Well hydrated, Sayyid was immune to the constant emaciation and sickly wobble of most living on the planet. Uri supposed it was how earthlings themselves used to look prior to the Post-Industrial Shock.

"At last!" Sayyid exclaimed. Two technicians brought the totes into the salon. "So much bureaucracy with this particular procurement. You wouldn't believe it." Sayyid deactivated the locks and unclasped the lid on one container. Inside were the two nuclear warheads.

"I thought weapons were forbidden on Al Fadah Medina. Unfamiliar with caliphate tenants as I am, I would think this violates that particular rule rather egregiously," Uri said, lighting a cigarillo. He knew Sayyid disapproved, that was one reason he smoked in his presence.

"You'd be right. But this is not meant for Al Fadah Medina."

Uri raised an eyebrow. "An itchy trigger finger? Who's getting the business end of these beasts?"

"Come again?" Sayyid said, confused. "You misunderstand, my friend. We've no intention of detonating these. We're going to modify their nuclear ordnance in order to archive them on Earth, insha'Allah. And you are correct; we are violating Al Fadah Madina sharia, but Azraq Hawat's imam has allowed us a temporary exception. Of course, they cannot stay. I'm sure you're curious."

Uri gazed at the warheads' rust-pocked carapaces. They looked like a pair of massive bullets ready to be loaded into a mythic revolver.

Archivists weren't paid to ponder the esoteric positing of Al' Madina's philosophies; they were paid to deliver. Weeks spent alone on the tumultuous Indian Ocean with "The Left and Right Wing of the Apocalypse"—"Zliva" and "Pravo" as he'd nicknamed the bombs—piqued his interest.

"I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a little bit curious."

"We commissioned a vault to be constructed in Earth's far north, Jan Mayen, an island in the Arctic Ocean."

"Never heard of it."

"Most haven't. It's a volcanic atoll many kilometers away from the nearest human settlements. It's a geological anomaly best suited to survive the Post-Industrial Shock, according to our inference engines," Sayyid explained smugly.

"You're thinking long term?" Uri raised an eyebrow, sipping the last of his qahwah.

"The First Caliphate of the Prophet Mohammed—Peace be upon Him—lasted for half a millennium. We intend to do the same."

"I see." Uri said, tapping his cigarillo into the empty cup. "And I suppose you need someone to deliver these?"

Sayyid smiled back, saying nothing. Uri shrugged noncommittally.

"I suppose if the price is right... But why? Trapped on Earth, you won't get to poke and prod them like the rest of your toys," Uri motioned in the direction of the scatter of odd machines, troves of recondite endeavor now appreciated by only a few. "Bombs are designed to explode, so why—?"

"While our studies pre-occupy us, it's our archives that truly motivate us. When it comes to

Al' Madina's mandate, we maintain an objective approach; we try not to judge history. With conquest being humankind's natural order, and weapons its core technology, much can be culled scientifically from such penultimate doom," Sayyid explained.

Uri sighed, crossing his arms in thought. "Penultimate? Then what's the ultimate?"

"The acerbic ghosts of our former industrial world, the byproducts of too much energy consumed too quickly. These—" Sayyid said, petting the warheads like a pair of Rottweilers. "—are just playthings, capable of small but fiery bursts of annihilation. However their explosive spectacle pales in comparison to the over-heated rot now visited below by less glamorous means."

Uri nodded, humoring the sheikh.

He mentally predicted Sayyid's requiem-like reply. The sheikhs' brand of messianic fatalism provoked such dictums, however hypocritical. Too many years spent in their heavenly kasbahs, they'd grown detached from the ailing Earth. Despite Al Fadah Madina's monofilament umbilical, the fetus now felt free to judge its placental mother, blasé and absentminded. Sayyid adamantly denied the caliphate was a harsh judge of history, but he could barely conceal the contempt in his voice.

"The mission's dangerous. Your orbital pods can't reach the upper latitudes," Uri said. "I'll have to escort the payload on world. It'll be a slog. I want my stipend tripled."

"I'm sure that can be arranged. Besides this tote, what else did you bring us?"

Uri popped the other container. "Odds and ends." Uri displayed a magazine of data cartridges. "These are for Sheikh Abdul-Azim. I retrieved them

from NIT's digital libraries in Bhopal. He'd requested an additional database from Srinigar, but there's plague there now, so..."

"And what about this?" Sayyid said, picking up and limply dropping one of the ejection suit's arm sleeves.

"Something that wasn't on the list: a high-temp pressure suit, part of a bomber's ejection system. Good condition. Thought it might be worth an ingot or two?"

Sayyid pushed out his lower lip with curious ambivalence. The suit wouldn't get many takers, probably too practical, not esoteric enough for the sheikhdoms' academic pursuits. A gray economy had emerged among Al' Madina's support crew, paramilitaries, and maintenance engineers; he could most likely trade it for a logistical drop, or a weapons upgrade.

"And what about this?" Sayyid lifted a bushy eyebrow and reached in for the mask's box. Opening it, his eyes brightened. "Who wanted this... thing?"

"There was no name on the communiqué routing code, just a number. Its associations are classified." Uri tried to snatch the box away from Sayyid's eager hands. "You don't have a need-to-know, Sayyid. Hand it over. 'Secret Life of Arabia' and all that, right?"

"Shame, what is it?"

"Haven't a clue," Uri lied. "A cult artifact. I nicked it off some Thuggees in Mumbai."

He made a mental note to erase the procurement log on his console. Despite all the weeks spent among the Thuggee phansigars, gold was no longer an adequate reward. The mask's mystery tugged at him like Khyber opium. He decided to keep it.

The sheikh inspected the artifact as Uri reached impatiently for the box. Sayyid had already removed the mask. "Yes, it has an interface technology, neural sequencing, and associative inductive circuits, see?" The sheikh traced the spindly blobs with a manicured finger. Uri stepped closer and backlit a few of the mask's arms with a utility LED. Sayyid continued to speculate, "It could be an enhancement technology with an integrated alpha-wave distributor, designed for amputees and paralysis victims, something like that. But why the intricate religious symbology?"

"I doubt the Kali Thuggees would be interested in rehabilitation technology. Could it be a player of some sort?" Uri asked, leadingly.

"Possibly," replied Sayyid, unaware of Uri's insinuation. "Direct alpha-write systems are a dark art. Morosov never had much success. Alpha interpreters were the norm, expensive and impossible to come by, mostly experimental. I've never heard of a 'personal model,' " Sayyid paused thoughtfully, stroking his jet moustache.

"Alkonost dabbled in interpreters, psychological operations and prisoner interrogation. I actually saw a demonstration of the technology once. The subject's side effects were... I guess you could say, 'severe,'" Uri continued.

"I wonder if Wafiq on Ahmar Manzil requested this? He's been obsessed with Crimean biologics lately, I—"

"Enough." Uri finally grabbed the box away from Sayyid. "Archivist's ethics and all that. You understand, sheikh? I can't disclose."

"Of course," Sayyid said, surprised. "You're tired. Let's get you to the guesthouse. Tomorrow we'll discuss your mission in more detail."

Uri yawned in agreement.

[NB] CHAPTER FOUR

January 2156 C.E.

The hotel stood like a candle on Bicaz's western edge, waxy ice dripping down its shelled flanks. Sniper fire had chipped away most of the frozen blobs from the roof-walk, leaving a palisade of shattered concrete and rebar. The ice storm continued into its fourth day. Fueled by an Ural cold front, an inversion layer trapped the warmth of the Sahara's northern rain belts. The structure was the highest point in the valley with a strategic view into the Bicaz Gorge, a claustrophobic chasm that split the Carpathian's eastern flanks.

Pinned down, Sava took a swig of vodka and handed his flask to his specialist. "Don't these bastards ever take a day off?"

"If they did, you would have missed this meteorological wonder."

"What?"

"This," Mach said, looking up into the sky. "A once-in-a-lifetime ice storm."

"It could be raining frogs for all I give a shit. Where are those bastards?"

"Carpis are like mosquitoes, comrade, you don't see or hear them until it's too late."

Sava looked out over the sandbag wall. More pops of gunfire. "Goddamn it! I'm sick of this. We're going to smoke these fuckers out, all right?"

"Fine by me."

"Any idea where they might be?"

"I spotted tracer fire to the northwest."

Nova Byzantium's Moldavan Campaign had stretched into its second year. Provincial diplomats, dispatched to the city of Bicz, had failed to reason with the Carpians Alliance, a loose confederation of barbarians determined to fend off the encroaching empire. Under contract, Alkonost managed a fragile beachhead in the valley, with most of their resources dedicated to defending a hydroelectric dam north of the city. Using a hidden traverse, the " Carpi" targeted the facility from the Ceahlau Massif's highlands. Combat operations focused on cutting off the tribals' alpine avenues, a challenge even in the best weather. If Bicz fell, the Province of Moldova would lose its main power plant.

Alkonost motives were not entirely mercenary; they had a self-interested stake in insuring Operation Trajan's success. Alkanost's homeland, The Free State of Transnistria and its capital Tiraspol, bordered the province of Moldova along its eastern frontier. Allowing hordes of marauding Carpi to overrun the border and swarm the banks of the Dneister would be bad for business. Alkonost command was adamant that Operation Trajan be Tiraspol's number one priority, fueling the campaign with blood and largesse. "Bicz must not fall" became the rallying cry, encouraging the morale of the mercenary's zealots.

"Wire a trace sensor to the microwave tower," Sava ordered, head scrunched into his shoulders like a turtle. "Mach spotted muzzle flash to the northwest."

"The northwest? You sure?" Sergeant Sklar called, "Mach! Get over here," Sava's gangly specialist scurried across the hotel's icy roof. "Mach, where're they at?"

"Up under the overhang near some trees... I think."

"You think?" Sklar glared.

"Sergeant Sklar, forget about it. Wire up the sensor, now!" Sava barked.

A squall of freezing rain let loose a cacophony; the forest cracked like gunfire as limbs snapped under the ice's weight, the woody explosions providing audible camouflage for the Carpis. Sava yelled for the squad to take cover as another hail of bullets peppered the hotel.

Sklar pulled an optical device from his satchel. The sensor bulged with moth-eyes like an insect's head, contorting light into streaks of black rainbows. He slid over to the hotel's radio tower, a scaffold dripping with icicles the size of ancient stalactites.

"Hurry!"

Zippering the tie-wire, Sklar toggled the sensor's power. Its LED failed to glow until he yanked out the battery module, tapped it, and slapped it back into the receptacle.

"Come on!"

"The cuing circuit takes time to reboot. Almost ready," he shouted. Crimson suddenly squirted from Sklar's shoulder, the gunshot shattering his scapula.

"Sniper!"

Sklar slumped like a marionette, arm pinioned by his macerated deltoid. Frothy blood gurgled from his lips as he lurched forward, stumbled, and collapsed against the tower. A flailing hand knocked the sensor to life; the blue LED flashed active. Mach and Sava rushed onto the roof and each grabbed one of the sergeant's boots, pulling him belly-down back to the safety of the sandbags.

"I need his console," Sava said, fishing through Sklar's webbing. He found it in a hip pouch and activated the remote. The monochrome screen sparked to life, delivering a grainy image of the mountainside.

"I'm giving him morphine," Mach said, triaging the sergeant. Blood sputtered from his mouth as his lung collapsed. "We're going to need medevac."

Sava ordered Mach to radio for an APC then went back to tweaking the sensor's console. An idea came to him. Unbuckling Sklar's helmet chinstrap, he removed it and balanced it on the butt of his Vepr bullpup. From a kilometer away, no one would be able to tell it was only a helmet propped on an assault rifle.

"Lift it up when I say," he said, handing his rifle to a nearby recruit.

The midday gloom washed out the tiny screen. Shielding it with his hand, Sava squinted at the grainy image. He waited for the right moment then nodded. The recruit held his breath and pushed the dummy above the sandbag rampart. Before he could exhale, a bullet whizzed in but missed its mark, the round ricocheting harmlessly away.

"There!" Sava pointed at the screen.

"You got it?" Mach asked, while trying to hold pressure to Sklar's wound with field dressing.

Sava nodded.

Using strobes, the trace sensor detected micro-displacements in real-time. Tuned to the speed of a bullet, the device gated out ambient clutter, tracking the missile's trajectory by marking its path with a digitized arc. Another helmet thrust provoked a blitz of sniper fire as pixilated parabolas collected on the wavering screen.

"They're tucked into that overhang, just underneath the ridgeline," Sava pointed.

"Good eye. Lurking along the cliff wall like a bunch of nesting wallcreepers, eh?"

Sava ordered spotters to remain behind and recruited a squad to join him on reconnoiter. But first, they had to haul Sklar down to the hotel lobby. Tailbones and elbows bruised and throbbed as the men skidded down the staircase's icy flume. Each misstep and Sklar crumpled to his knees, his comrades unable to shoulder the deadweight. The throaty yelps were nauseating reminders for them to watch their step. Down in the lobby, they laid the sergeant out on a moldy lounge.

Mach checked his radio. "They're on their way."

"How long?" Sava asked, gazing past the debris-filled foyer to street beyond.

"Five minutes."

Half an hour later the whine of an APC filled the gutted lobby. Sava met the driver, a frightened corporal chauffeuring an even more frightened captain back to the airfield.

"I need to get myself and five men up to the northwest edge of town, about a klick—just a little detour. How about it?" Sava asked, taking cover next to the vehicle's armored hatch.

"No can do, sir. Not possible. I need to get Captain Zelinski here to his chopper by 18:00 hours. We can take your wounded back to the medics, though."

"Fine. Mach, you and Krajnik get Sklar loaded. Do you have any ammo?"

"A case of 5.56mm magazines, a few grenades, some depleted uranium 7.62mms, and a rocket or two."

"Anything else?"

"A med kit and a mule."

"We'll take it."

"But!"

Sava opened the rear hatch and saluted the cringing captain as he and Mach helped themselves to the vehicle's cache. With a heave, Sava and Mach dragged the collapsed mule out onto the ice. A line of green bars glowed with power, the machine fully primed. Sava unclipped its remote and handed it to Mach.

"Get Sklar loaded."

Sava plotted their path through Bicz's western ruins. Mortar rounds rained down with the storm's hyper-cooled sleet. The city was a ghost, color and texture erased by curtains of marbled white. Sava lit a smoke flare and led his men through an obstacle course of fallen walls and automobile skeletons. Past the fog, he spotted the city's collapsed cement factory. Its teetering smokestack offered a rally point, just a sprint from a copse of beech to the splintered forest beyond.

The mule's pneumatic whir shadowed them as they dodged through the mayhem. The bipedal unit labored under the weight of the team's gear. Sniper rounds sung from ridge-top aeries, gunning for the automaton but missing. Unlike its human counterparts, the mule's random sways made getting a bead difficult. With a lucky shot, the mule was susceptible, a single-point design failure minimized by its Brownian cageyness.

The spotters radioed Mach from the hotel. The trace sensor still pinpointed the sniper clutch a thousand feet up under the overhang. Sava snapped the Vepr to his shoulder and peered through the rifle's scope. Toggling into long-wave infrared,

he saw the Carpis' amoeba-like smudge on the mountainside.

"What's the plan?" Mach asked.

"I want you, Krajnik, and the mule to head to higher ground, start rolling flash-bangs over their ledge -create a distraction. Dragan, Orel, and I will approach them from the side. Got it?"

Everyone nodded.

Once under the cover of the icicled forest, Mach and Krajnik started up the slick hill. Sava pulled a few more magazines and grenades from the passing mule, dividing the ammo between himself and his two men. Like a drunken savant, the lumbering walker followed Mach, constantly on the verge of toppling but remaining upright.

"Over here."

Sava led his men to a nearby boulder. Both were greenhorns, Orel boyish and round-faced, Dragan leaner and swarthier. A few service patches would've been a comfort, but they'd been recruited from the Pripyat frontier-almost barbarians themselves. Chernobyl's exclusion zone was well known for toughening recruits' constitutions.

"I want you two to trail me by ten to twenty meters. Wait for my mark," Sava ordered, jamming a few more rounds into his rifle clip.

"What's your mark?" Orel asked.

"You'll know," Sava said, patting his weapon.

Both nodded.

They struggled up a deer path, watching their step on the frozen runoff and slick granite. Sava's lungs burned with each breath of the frigid air. His face stiffened from frost, each breath thawing and refreezing his stubble. Cold was a rare misery. Precious minutes ebbed as the

Alkonost mercenaries chipped and stabbed their way upward.

The forest—a snarl of black capillaries entombed in ice—concealed little, but the falling limbs and curtains of sleet scrambled motion, or at least confused it. Perched above the Carpi's ledge, near a ravine, Sava paused to reorient. He held up a clenched fist, a sign for Dragan and Orel to hold. Sliding on his belly, he crawled down to the bulging roots of a sycamore, a protective nook to prop his Vepr and sight in.

He signaled the recruits to be ready then radioed Mach to let loose. Phosphorous grenades tumbled over the overhang and exploded like miniature suns. A shadow ducked out and squeezed off three rifle rounds, ricocheting into trees and rocks. One by one, the Carpi crept from the ledge to lay down suppressing fire.

Crouched behind him, Dragan and Orel unleashed enfilade. With the enemy distracted, Sava clenched his aim and buried a salvo of a metal-jacketed lead into a Carpi's neck. The body flopped and slid off the cliff's goatee of ice, tumbling to the valley floor. Bracing for a full assault, Sava was surprised when a plume of blue-white smoke billowed up from the ledge.

"Where are they?"

"They're escaping," Sava yelled.

Half crawling, half sprinting, the three traversed the valley's lower tiers in pursuit, westward. Sava lost them in the smoke. Footprints in the leaves dovetailed into a provisional trail, the enemy's hasty slips and skids leading down to the gorge's maw.

"There's five, maybe six of them," Sava huffed over the radio. "Mach, we're going after them."

"Roger, that."

The cleft's walls stacked shadow upon shadow, a roofless cave. Even the pearly hoarfrost was impotent against the gloom. A labyrinthine broken road wove its way through the granite fissure. Long impassible by motorcar, the tarmac was fractured. They'd gone far beyond Alkonost's defensive perimeter. The mouth of the river gorge was enemy territory. Near a bend in the chasm, Sava stopped to rally Dragan and Orel.

"I don't like it," Dragan said, cheeks puffing into his clenched fists. "It's a trap."

"Carpi territory. They own it," added Orel.

"We'll scout up, skirt the road, and do a little recon, half a klick maybe. If we don't find anything, we'll turn around."

Both nodded.

The recruits followed Sava down a slip path to the shore of the gorge's ice-chunked river. The sleet turned to sodden snow, as the Saharan monsoons lost their battle with the taiga freeze. An artillery barrage rippled up the gorge. The explosions released a cascade of icicles from canyon walls, splinters spangling the air with a rainbow mist. Twisting in the riverbank's mud, Sava looked back in the direction of the city. A rolling flash erupted from the hotel, a direct hit; the enemy mortar had broken the building's spine.

"It's going to collapse. The squad!"

"We've got to get back."

"Hold tight, goddamn it!"

Sava climbed back up the embankment to the tarmac, pulling and pushing his men. Once on the road, they started to jog back to town when they

noticed a man loitering a few decameters ahead, unperturbed by the raging battle.

They stopped and took cover.

"Who in the hell?" Orel whispered, scrunched over Sava's shoulder.

Sava snapped his Vepr to his shoulder and activated the sight. The man was a Carpi, his back to them. Loading the chamber, Sava aimed for the head.

"He's turning around."

Something was wrong. The barbarian wore a tattered trench coat; his jackboots glistened with buckles and straps, his head shrouded. The Vepr's red crosshair swayed between goggled eyes, canvassed jowls puffing through distended filters.

"He's wearing a hood. What the hell?"

"Must be a chief, no tribal livery. He sees us."

Sava was about to pull the trigger when his scope clouded. Smoke. He looked up. Spiraling contrails of sputtering grenades tumbled down, expelling a flowery gas, rich and dense. He panned the hollows and caves of the canyon wall but saw no one.

"It's halothane!" Dragan said, covering his mouth and nose with the pit of his elbow.

"Nerve gas?" Orel asked.

"No, an anesthetizer, an old Morosov recipe." Sava realized nobody brought hoods. No dead zones were forecasted, so they hadn't seen the need.

"We've to get out the fuck out of here."

Sprinting in the direction of the hooded barbarian, they unloaded their rifles. Numbness overwhelmed them, their vision blurred, each burst more poorly aimed than the last. The halothane took effect quickly, reducing the men to flailing cross-eyed idiots.

#

Roused from his fugue, Sava's joints throbbed. Smacking his lips, he cleared the mucous from his throat with a cough. Stinging eyes squinted at a bleak inverted world, the blurs pulsing with the throbs of congested blood flow. Strapped upside-down to the wooden crossbeams of a capsized cross, his wrists and ankles were cinched together with rope. Canted back, Sava struggled to lift his head from the frigid mud.

"Cine esti?"

"El este un vampir!" answered a chorus of children.

Wood smoke billowed over him. He coughed again. His sinuses were on fire, lungs pricked by a million needles.

"Cine esti?" the voice repeated.

A dog, poorly restrained by a frail child, lunged. Someone had painted yellow eyes above the animal's own. Sava struggled to look around.

They were in the center of a Carpi mountain village; ramshackle huts crowded around a cobbled square, sickly conifers demarcating the claustrophobic perimeter. Pieces of discarded plastic and long-broken machines littered the ground. Dragan and Orel, unconscious and half-naked, were restrained in similar ritualistic fashion. A barbarian towered over him, his feral beard framing a leathery face.

"No Carpiani," Sava croaked.

"Ce doresti? De unde ești, ce armată?."

"No Carpiani. I don't speak your garble!"

"El este un vampir! El este un vampir!" The Carpi brood giggled.

Something about a vampire, Sava gathered. The children looked like malnourished goblins with

their oversized enrichment hoods, distended torsos supported by spindly legs. The gear was war booty, doubtless nicked from another ambush. The remnants of clothing they wore were filthy, bony knees protruding from torn pant-legs.

Orel exploded in an animal shriek. A child had impaled his doughy stomach with a sharpened stake. The boy, startled by his own act of brutality, leapt back, leaving the wooden dirk dangling from Orel's midsection.

"Stop!" Sava screamed. "For Christ's sake!"

The barbarian lashed Sava's midriff with a horsewhip, the sting silencing him. Jackboots kicked a dollop of ooze into Sava's face, the mud trickling into his mouth and nose. He recognized his tormentor: the un-hooded Carpi chieftain from the road.

"I need a drink of water... please," Orel begged.

"Give him some water, goddamn it!" Sava yelled.

The chieftain knelt down and batted Sava's cheeks with the coil of his whip. "Porci de razboi," he laughed with a yellow grin. "Aveti de gand sa mori?"

Two men approached from the cobble square. They carried a disassembled mortar, tripod and tube slung over their broad shoulders. Words were exchanged, heads nodded. One of the barbarians, a lanky man with a black braided beard, crossed to Sava and stooped down.

"He wants to know who you are?" The man's accent was thick with lisps. "And why are you here?"

"Why?"

The barbarian lifted his thick-treaded boot, ready to stomp.

"We're soldiers... like you."

"Like us?" the Carpi snorted, pulling his foot back. "Not like us, mercenary man." He motioned to Dragan and Orel "You three are vampires."

"Vampiri!" The children shouted.

"What? Vampires?" Sava replied, confused.

"You and your men kill for gold, lustful for the old ways, for the empire. Our children—" the interpreter gestured to the slovenly youngsters "—die to fill your coffers."

"Not true," Sava protested. "We've tried to reason with you people, but you won't listen."

The barbarian laughed, deep and guttural. "It matters not, does it? Our children believe you to be creatures of the night, wandering shadows of St. Andrew's Eve, a harbinger of ill fortune and death."

"Superstitious nonsense," Sava spat.

"The Carpiani have seen the Alkonost drink innocent blood. You are life drainers. Demons. So—" he said, petting the head of a jittery child "—it is time to suffer a vampire's fate."

"Stop! Wait!"

"Stop? If we show you mercy, will you show us mercy? No, vampire man, a road of poppy seeds and thorns would do little to slow your greed."

"But—"

The conversation was over. The barbarian straightened then kicked Dragan's head with a stiff leg. Sava heard a nauseating cartilaginous pop, tissue grinding into bone. Dragan's eyes widened then rolled back into his head. The chieftain grabbed a torch from an alder pyre and licked the tops of Dragan's outstretched arms. Pale pink flesh reddened, bubbling with blisters.

"His neck's broken!" Sava barked. "He can't feel it!"

The horror was unrelenting. Sava pinched his eyes shut with a clenched grimace, desperate to awaken from the nightmare. But the children's cackles and the moans of his comrades proved escape impossible.

Just as the mania reached crescendo, Sava felt a crunching snap of his metatarsals. He tried to catch his breath from the excruciating pain. In between gasps, he saw a boy perched above him aiming for his toes with a bolt cutter. Rivulets of blood coiled down his leg like ribbons around a maypole, staining black the blue-gray of his camouflage.

His small toe plopped to the ground next to his head. A child picked up the grape-sized amputation, rubbed it clean it with filthy snow, then handed to the chieftain. With a rotted smile, the bearded barbarian tossed it up like a coin flip then tucked it into his trench coat.

Hyperventilating, Sava's vision dimmed. The blood pooling in his brain's made him dizzy. Clenching the edge of the wooden crucifix, he felt splinters dig under his fingernails. The pain was too much, blackness a gift.

#

Gray drizzle, dawn or dusk, Sava couldn't tell. Dehydration had led to headache, his temples and eyes throbbing. He opened his mouth to drink the rain but managed only to wet his throat. The warmth of hypothermia replaced the painful shivers, his chattering teeth finally silenced.

The square was empty. Dragan and Orel were dead, lips blue, eyes open but cloudy. Exsanguinated, Orel was drained by the impalement. A coagulated mask covered his cheeks and forehead, as inner hemorrhage had sought its own level. Sava guessed

Dragan's end had been quicker. His snapped neck had spared him the pain of partial immolation.

A lingering child threw rocks at him, muddy pebbles, more agitating than painful. Sava opened his mouth to speak, but his mouth felt peculiar. Probing with his tongue, he felt raw sockets filled with the iron taste of blood. Someone had yanked his canine teeth out, the impish rabble finally succeeding in de-fanging their vampire. The leather tore at his wrists as he struggled to free himself. He wobbled trying to topple his cross. Above the child's snickers and the patter of raindrops, he heard a distant hydraulic whine.

The mule appeared at the village edge. Curious, the Carpi child approached the walker, its mechanical legs nearly as tall as the boy. On a mission, the automaton wove around the child and headed to the square's overgrown churchyard. Lacking a stealth mode, the machine indifferently sauntered through enemy territory. Shrieking incoherently, half-dressed barbarians poured from their huts in pursuit.

The mule wandered into a Balkan church near the village's well. Frantic, the warriors collected in the adjacent graveyard and argued amongst themselves, afraid to enter. The building's mildewed windows sputtered with sparks. An explosion vaporized the building, incinerating the tinder like thermite.

The church was a Carpi weapons depot. Somehow the mule's operator divined it as a target of opportunity, and like a guided missile, had honed in on the arsenal. More bursts shook the ground as stockpiles of mortars and ammunition detonated. The surviving villagers recoiled—scorched and wounded from the blast.

Two Alkonost crept along a fence towards Sava. The child tried to scream an alarm, but Krajnik dispatched the boy with a silenced round to the head.

"Jesus, Sava," Mach said, cutting his leather restraints. "You're a mess!"

With a somersault, Sava toppled into the ankle-deep muck. Krajnik hoisted him upright, eyes locked on the reeling Carpi villagers. Weakly, Sava reached out for Dragen and Orel.

"We can't leave them with these monsters. It's not right!"

"Sorry, Sava, there's no time. They're dead, and we've got to go!" Mach motioned to Krajnik. Both wedged their shoulders under Sava's armpits to crutch him.

They ducked into a sedge-filled pasture, passing by a huddle of bony horses as they limped for the forest. The weather was warming. Icy paths melted into ramps of slick rock and root. Movement down the mountainous slopes was difficult, but the muddy earth was more forgiving. Mach radioed for evacuation. Their rendezvous was a half-klick away, a plateau high above the valley.

Sava fought for air—lungs filling with festering phlegm—as they hobbled up the last boulder-strewn rise to the landing zone. A thumping whoosh of helicopter blades greeted them. Mach and Krajnik eased Sava onto a canvas litter. A medic leapt down and rushed in with a thermal blanket and an IV.

With everyone aboard, the Hind gunship dipped over the granite precipice, fighting for lift as it headed east and into Alkonost territory. In the valley below, a black mushroom cloud billowed

above the Carpi village, the ammo dump still smoldering.

"One survivor: Lieutenant Sava Valis; Specialist Dragan and Private Orel are dead. Massive Carpi casualties." Mach radioed. "He'll survive. They'd him tied up all night, he's suffering from exposure..." Krajnik pulled a pack of cigarettes from his breast pocket, lit two and handed one to Mach. "Yep, got it. Roger that, over and out."

"Who was it?" Krajnik asked, taking a drag.

"A Lieutenant Uri Vitko?" Mach replied, stowing his headset. "Mission intelligence point-of-contact, they're always shuffling the deck. Said he's working a listening post up near the dam, collecting information on Carpi movement behind the lines. Do you know him?"

"Uri?" Krajnik nodded, taking a drag. "Of course. He's my commanding officer when I'm not on special assignment."

"Do you like him?"

Krajnik shrugged, "He's not a bad guy when you get to know him. A hell of a chess player, I hear."

[NB] CHAPTER FIVE
September 2163 C.E.

An oasis: a wadi filled with date palms, camels drinking from papyrus lined pools of emerald, the obligatory Bedouin tents, perpetual sunsets of pixilated purple and mango orange, the silhouette of a desert caravan wandering the crests of a dune sea...

Uri puffed on the hookah and idly watched the holograms.

Oasis nostalgia was Al Fadah Madina's second religion, a pining for a world that existed only in glossy montages unearthed from an extinct global culture. The chaos of short, exhausting lives had been replaced by the peace of Al' Madina's soothing lounges. The seductive notion of "oasis" offered a divine peace. For Uri, the absence of his endorphin-fueled anxiety was its own euphoria, the artificial tranquility a fleeting luxury.

The guest salon was dim, a dado of ambient jade providing a cool light. Green—the color of Islam—glossed over cracks within the woven polycarbon and epoxy, smothering imperfection with shadow. The caliphate deemed it important to maintain "atmosphere." Without these illusions, the recycled air and tasteless water threatened to shatter the fragile membrane protecting them from their orbital reality.

Vicarious and insular, the sheikhs thrived on notional archetypes, canonical players on Earth's fragmented chessboard. A rogue's gallery of madmen, slaves, mercenaries, kings, and conquerors

played historic analogs in the sheikhdом's simplified models. Uri didn't have the heart, or the incentive, to re-educate his clever, yet naïve, paymasters.

Through the course of their idle investigations, Neolithic savagery was a prehistoric compulsion the sheikhs could never reconcile. Uri believed the world's brutality had to be lived to be fully understood. The evolutionary spine of hominids had sprouted horns; civilization managed to file them down to blunt ornaments for a short time, but no longer; the beast was back.

To Uri, the much-preached new Dark Age was spurious. It was more like a new Stone Age: humanity regressed to its simplest state. Humanity was dying as human beings were born: id-driven, whimpering, and thrashing; ignorant of both the past and the future.

Uri took a puff of the apple-apple shisha and let its sweet incense fill him. He closed his eyes and slumped back into the satin of the salon's divan.

He dozed, another brief nap, the ambient sitar music lulling away his thoughts. Minutes, or maybe an hour, passed before a whisper muted the artificial music. Sayyid requested his presence. Uri switched off the wall glyph holo and the desert life evaporated into black-emerald crosshatch.

#

Uri floated in the mosque's outer arcade as the sheikhs gathered for evening prayer inside the turning hall. A suspended platform, pulled by hydraulics on circular tracks, revolved inside the toroid's hub. Knee rungs and foot clips perforated the carpet's arabesque, anchoring the prostrated

pious in zero gravity. The Qibla—the direction of the Kaaba in Mecca—was always down, the holy mosque slightly north of Al Fadah Madina's nadir. Illusory, the Azraq Hawat toroid spun around the mosque's "floor" everything in motion except those performing Sala'at.

"Hayya' ala Falah. Hayya' ala Falah."

Uri quietly hovered, a courtesy lanyard kept him from knocking about irreverently. Sayyid was to meet him at the mosque prior to his technical and mission briefs. The toroid's engineering bays were nodal to the sheikhs' office, requiring a journey through the hub complex.

"Allah Akbar. Allah Akbar."

Prayer ended. Sayyid detached from the rug's blue tessellates and drifted over to the arcade's antechamber. Uri deposited his empty porcelain coffee bulb into a receptacle and detached.

"Thank you for waiting. My salon's inertial rug is very uncomfortable, and its directional spotter needs calibration. I try to get to the mosque when possible."

"Shall we?" Uri said, impatiently motioning towards the elevator lobby.

Uri had no tolerance for humoring Sayyid's uptight eccentricities. An investigation had been opened into his weapon violation. As was customary, an incident report had to be filed with Al' Madina's police. Showing little allegiance to his archivist, Sayyid said nothing as the imams enforced the colony's sharia. Penalty fines were incurred, and Uri's stipend dwindled by a third. Al' Madina's incorruptible austerity could be maddening.

Sayyid's laboratory was electromechanical mayhem. The technical mania of the facility

rivaled Earth's looted equivalents. Junior technocrats greeted them. Not yet full members of the sheikhdome, they labored as apprentices, dabbling in the Earth's lost arcana. Kaliq, an awkward boy with a faint mustache, introduced himself. Uri guessed he wasn't any more than twenty-five. Denizens of Al' Madina were slow to incubate, pubescence delayed by a vague celestial dilation.

"Archivist Uri, it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance." Kaliq nervously offered a vigorous two-handed shake, his accent thick.

Uri smirked.

Archivists were minor celebrities in the orbital city. Unable to mingle with the funk and grit of the Earth's upheaval themselves, it provoked taboo, especially among Al' Madina's younger men. Sayyid pushed past the youths impatiently and ducked under loops of coolant hose and power cable. Beyond the corrugated web two white canisters sat atop a plinth. Kaliq slid on a hooded shield and checked the cylindroids.

"Ten percent above background—some alpha... beta is stable," Kaliq said, removing his hood.

"So these are the Left and the Right Wing of the Apocalypse, 'Zliva' and 'Pravo'... retrofitted, new and improved." Uri crossed his arms and admired Al' Madina's handy work.

"Kaliq, show him," Sayyid said.

The youth extracted an aluminum tube from a cryogenic cooler with a pair of tongs. He hovered the source over the nuclear pair. An idle hiss swelled into a roaring static that swamped the Geiger's tinny speakers.

"Is this safe?" Uri asked.

Sayyid said nothing, gesturing for Uri to pay attention.

The two containers uncoiled in a mechanical burst, exposing their radioactive cores. Five sinuous vanes protruded from pneumatic spokes, each a sub-compartment holding a partition of heavy metal. The transformed cylinders looked like graphite water wheels, their axle a mesh of automated clockwork.

"There's an inner anthracene scintillator that triggers an optical safety switch when a cascade event is imminent—" Sayyid started to explain.

"What's a 'cascade event'?" Uri interrupted.

"A meltdown," Kaliq explained, agitating Sayyid.

"As I was saying, when an event is imminent, the fissile geometry alters itself. A sudden density change that quickly 'cools' the enriched uranium," Sayyid continued.

Kaliq dumped the source back into the sublimating dewar. The nuclear roar receded, the Geiger counter's "clicks" reduced to a dribble. With a flip of a switch, the containers' hydraulics retracted to their original configuration. Kaliq loaded the devices into a large duffel bag and motioned for Uri to feel the weight.

"Together they're forty kilos, but remember, gravity's less in the toroid."

Uri climbed into the shoulder strap and heaved the load off the plinth. "Still a bit heavy. This, with my weapons kit and gear..." Uri paused. "Just beware, if some one really wants this, they're going to get it from me. If I'm on the run, I won't let this slow me down."

"We understand. Risk is part of the business," Sayyid said, stroking his moustache. "If such an

eventuality occurs, your stipend will be forfeited and your contract terminated, understand?"

"I think that goes without saying."

"All right, onward... time to discuss the mission dossier."

In the lab's briefing room, Uri reclined in an armchair and waited for the hologram. A topographic world map, minus the meteorological gray-green swirls, filled the far wall. A disembodied glove hovered, spun, and expanded the ethereal globe. Uri lit a cigarillo and settled in, ignoring Sayyid's protesting stares.

"The pod's latitudinal limit is forty degrees north-south which puts the drop zone west of Nova Byzantium's Aegean frontier." Sayyid highlighted a peninsula in Central Macedonia. "Upon payload retrieval, Miriam—an Al' Madina agent—will transport you to Constantinople. There, a chartered Alkonost Antonov will fly you both to Jan Mayen with the consignment."

"The both of us? I work alone, Sayyid. And if I did require partner, it wouldn't be a woman," Uri protested, exhaling a plume of smoke into the projector's holographic matrix.

"A barbarian notion," Sayyid replied.

"No," Uri argued. "Females are just too hard to protect, especially outside the imperial frontier. Too much hassle. And need I remind you about barbarian notions here in the sheikhdom? Harems hawked and swapped for trinkets and salvage, females nothing but genetic material sequestered and sequenced in Al' Madina's attics. I know what goes on here," Uri argued, annoyed.

"Enough!" Sayyid yelled. "You will work with Miriam, or your contract will be canceled."

Uri opened his mouth but said nothing, smashing out his cigarillo in a decorative plate with a clenched fist.

"Miriam is a top geophysicist and is an extremely capable fixer, especially inside the empire. Her connections with Norsk-Statoil are an invaluable asset. And she's well aware of the political situation."

"The political situation?"

"Yes, the caliphate's relationship with Constantinople has soured. We've claimed salvage rights to Old Palestine and Southern Assyria, territories under Nova Byzantium's protectorate. Our Salafist brothers are fighting by proxy against an Alkonost division in Al Quds," Sayyid explained.

Uri nodded, eyes widened in mock shock. The same old blood, jingoism, and hegemony in the Holy Land, no one there had taken a day off since Jacob and Esau fought in Rebekah's womb.

Sayyid continued, "Bringing an Al' Madina warhead into Constantinople proper would be viewed as a terrorist act. This is a fragile operation. It... just looks bad. You understand?"

"Bad, indeed."

"So will you agree to this, or do I have to find some one else?"

"I'm not really sure why you need me. Why don't you just get this Miriam to deliver the payload?" Uri asked.

"You have the required military training necessary for a mission into the northwest's Khal Al Alam. This is a vitally important consignment. Out of the fifty-five archivists in the caliphate's employ, you hold the top survivability

index of our current agent stable. This delivery is too important."

Khal Al Alam, Arabic for "The Empty World," was the term the sheikhs used for the bedlam outside Nova Byzantium's fragile order. As the years stretched, Uri logged more months scouring the world's carcass than most. He felt comfortable in his Pleistocene skin, almost too comfortable.

"I'll do what you ask," Uri replied. Sayyid's argument was logical. "So if the caliphate can get me close to the frontier, I can airdrop in."

Sayyid closed his eyes and shook his head. "No, it is the Hajj. Our fleet of air vehicles is dedicated. You know this."

"It wouldn't be more than a four- or five-hour detour up to the Cilicia Sea," Uri pleaded.

"No, I'm sorry. I don't have control over these matters."

"What about a lift to Mecca from Soqotra with the Hajjis? I'd be closer, at least."

"You're an infidel, Uri. 'No unclean idolaters shall approach the Sacred Mosque.' It would be blasphemy. The mujahideen would behead me as an apostate and you with me," Sayyid lamented.

"You're being difficult, sheikh."

Sayyid threw up his hands, exasperated.

"There's absolutely nothing you can do for me, nothing?"

Sayyid shook his head.

"Fine. The slog. Get on with it," Uri shrugged, motioning to Sayyid to continue his briefing. A circuitous blue strand appeared on the map, snaking its way north from Soqotra, skirting the Red Sea's eastern shore.

"Using our diplomatic contacts in the Selassie Kingdom's northern Horn, we will smuggle you

through the pirate coasts north of the Aden Gulf. We've mujahideen influences in the Eastern Tuaregs as well, and a salt caravan will arrange to take you into the Sinai swamps. The Ma'dan tribes there can escort you to the Nile Delta. They'll help you avoid the cannibals. Maghreb slavers have their stockades just west of Gaza, there you'll be able to barter for passage to the lower Aegean."

Uri sighed, exhausted with the plans.

Sayyid rattled off the itinerary as easily as if they were directions to the nearest toilet, offending Uri's survivor sensibilities. Uri's estimate put the journey at a month. Northeastern Africa was depleted, hostile, and ravenous: terra mortus. To survive, he'd be forced to adopt the chameleon-like existence of the half-starved and rabid, a grueling ordeal. After his recent stunt with the Thuggees, he was not eager to repeat such a charade.

"Pirates, cannibals, slavers, and a reduction in my pre-negotiated stipend? One has to ask if you've my best interests at heart, Sayyid. Especially after recent events," Uri added sheepishly.

Sayyid stiffened. "Are you referring to the weapons incident at the nexus? It was a violation of Al Fadah Madina's sharia; a monetary sanction is completely fair in such a situation."

"So lax in your defense of those under your employ, it makes me wonder. That's all," shrugged Uri.

Sayyid's eyes widened with shock. Questioning an Al' Madina sheikh rarely occurred, but Uri was not his underling or his servant, he was a contractor. This was a business.

"Do you think I was in on the take? Skimming off the top? Is that it?" Sayyid's voice rose, hands flailing in contempt.

"I'm not accusing you of anything. Twenty ounces of gold may be nothing to you, but to an archivist working in the Khal Al Alam, it's a matter of life and death. Hard for you to appreciate, I realize."

Lips pursed in frustration, Sayyid held his words while his underlings silently fidgeted.

"Fine!" he said at last, again throwing up his hands. "I'll supplement the pro-rated stipend from my own reserves. Just get the shipment delivered, understand?"

Uri nodded.

With a measured flip of his kafiya, the sheikh turned and left, leaving Uri alone with the technicians. He shut his eyes to think.

"Where's my tote?" Uri asked.

"In the prep bay, archivist. Most all your procurements have been delivered to their respective sheikhs. There's nothing left but that pagan artifact and the bomber's ejection suit," Kaliq replied.

"Show me. I have an idea."

Kaliq introduced Sayyid's personal loadmaster, Fawzi, to Uri, a pudgy young man with a boyish chuckle. Responsible for the orbital pods, he would be readying Zliva and Pravo for their violent re-entry through the atmosphere. A surprised jolt tightened his jowly face as Uri described his idea. After a round of nervous laughter, the apprentices realized Uri was serious.

"This suit was only designed to handle a sub-orbital re-entry... speeds and altitudes much less

than a drop from geo-synchronous," Fawzi tried to explained.

"What if he rides tucked behind the aeroshell? The magnetic sleds launch two pods at a time; if we just launch the one—" Kaliq jumped in, eyes eager and bright, "—he could ride in the backseat, so to speak."

Fawzi shrugged, scratched the folds of his neck, and thought for a moment. "It is in the realm of engineering possibility. Those suits do have built in re-breathers. Archivist, you really want to burn, don't you?" he asked. "One false move—a slight shift in your center of gravity—and you'll slam into the Kármán line at thirty kilometers per second, then 'poof' like a meteor."

"Better than having my bones gnawed clean by a gang of Nubian double-Ys," Uri said, lighting another cigarillo.

"That may be true."

"My rifle's been jettisoned by the mujahideen, but I still have my field kit. Fawzi, if you can load it in the pod, along with Zliva, Pravo, and this..." Uri said, handing him the intricate wood box with the Kali mask inside.

"There should be enough room," the stocky loadmaster turned it over in his hands. "What is it?"

"Not completely sure. Adapted Morosov tech, I think, possibly a military alpha reader. Something new."

"And nobody claimed it? Have you tried it?"

"Tried it?" Uri shook his head. "No. Not really sure how one would try it," Uri lied.

"What's the consignment number?"

Uri pulled out his console and toggled through the communiqués to show him.

"Did Sayyid make you an offer?"

"Nope," Uri said curtly. "No one has."

"Shame. Seems like quite a piece of work. I would like to know more about this... this thing," Fawzi said. "Unique."

Uri nodded, feigning indifference.

Fawzi turned back to the suit. "Okay, archivist. It may be madness, but we'll do some modifications and give this contraption our best shot, insha'Allah."

#

Uri noticed his alien reflection in the control room glass, white carbon phenolics outlined by the suit's inky joints. He flipped up the gold visor and looked around the hangar. The airlock's sphincter was sealed in front of him, hiding the magnetic launch rail and endless vacuum beyond. He sat behind the pod's shield like a charioteer, waiting for launch.

Al Fadah Madina had never launched a human being into the void—at least not a live one—so Kaliq had constructed a high-G seat from an old lift pod. With a pull of a lever, the chair would disengage both Uri and the payload from the sled, slinging him into the Earth's exosphere. Uri breathed deep to stress the suit's regulator. The flight was estimated to take five hours, two orbits around the Earth to burn off velocity, and one to make the plunge. Clutching the pod's heat shield like a parasite, he would ride the nuclear warheads' pod back to Earth.

Kaliq had rigged an extra coolant tank to extend the suit's climate control to maintain miserable, yet endurable 35° C through reentry. Claustrophobic straps cinched the oversized ejection suit to fit him, only adding to the

unnatural heat. The suit was awkward in the false gravity, the added modifications bulky.

"Estimated time to departure?" Uri asked.

"Five minutes, archivist," Fawzi said over the radio's static buzz.

The launch was unsanctioned and a violation of Al' Madina sharia law. Sayyid's apprentices, although usually numbed by rote obedience, were eager to help pull off the stunt. Uri was betting on Sayyid's ambition to overcome any qualms. If successful, the end would justify the means. The only fallout from the exploit would be Uri himself if his payload should explode in a fiery contrail of radioactivity.

"Two minutes, archivist."

The technicians vacated the airlock. The hum of the rail's charging capacitors replaced the whisper of venting gas. The airlock dilated. Fawzi and Kaliq wished Uri luck and warned him to wait until he was clear of Al' Madina's toroids to release the electromagnetic sled. An icon, programmed into the suit display, was to cue him at each waypoint.

Uri, the pod's tense and nervous pilot, challenged the automated launching protocols, playing havoc to the guidance computer's stressed algorithms; the risk was high. Obsessively, bordering on farcical, Fawzi reminded Uri "to remain perfectly still." Tightening his muscles, he clutched the seat and waited.

"Launch!"

A blue-white pinwheel blew over the pod's aeroshell. The force of acceleration drained the blood from Uri's brain, walling off his peripheral vision with a black tunnel. Fawzi had reduced the rail launcher by ten megawatts, the bare minimum

for re-entry. Payloads were impervious to high-Gs, a minor stress; but for a yielding biomass like Uri, it was nothing less than a cosmic smack. The seat punched him through the half-kilometer rail barrel and into the ether.

The "English" from the rotating toroid sent Uri through a slow arc, the trajectory meticulously timed to miss the spokes of Al' Madina's hawats. Black pinpricks of vertigo swirled through the revolving wheels of the orbital colony. In a blink, he was free of the rotating superstructure.

Condensation clouded his face shield, blurring the digital rhythm of the visor's LEDs. In theory, the air supply's blend was mixed to prevent hyperventilation, but a panicky combination of agoraphobia and acrophobia worked against him. A cartoon icon flashed in the helmet's HUD—one of Fawzi's mnemonic codes. The dancing lion prompted him to pull the sled release. With shaky hands he reached down and reefed the loop's spring mechanism. The chassis fell away.

The parachute's self-adjusting straps, devised by Kaliq, fastened Uri to the pod's housing. The straps reeled out as needed to detune the tether's violent harmonics. Too much, or not enough, and the vibration would knock him unconscious. Uri manually unwound the spool, adding distance to the wobbling aeroshell.

The display flashed: 500 km.

He was too far up for the suit's barometric altimeter to work. Uri focused on his breathing. Thirty minutes into the descent, his vertiginous nausea ebbed. He disengaged the harness's chest buckles and shook it away. Flying now, he braved to look down.

Paisley skirts of algae bloomed around islands like raindrops. Closer, the Earth's tapestry was a mosaic of contours, a mesh of green and beige corralled by coastline. Nested inside were skeletons of abandoned cities connected by the tattered strands of road and broken rail. Bacterial patches of magenta clung to the shores of inlets and isolated bays. Uri searched for geographic landmarks: the twin kidneys of the Black and Caspian Seas, the crooked spine of the Caucasus... nothing. Swirls of smoke, dust, and cloud camouflaged continental shape.

56 km

Purple twilight surrendered to midnight, which turned again to golden dawn. Wisps of ionization shimmered around the aeroshell's rim. Uri's chariot skimmed the sky's solar cycles twice more. A steady diet of breathing and meditation held off his panic. He slid down the visor and tried to empty his mind letting time pass undeterred, until a snap roused him from his trance.

Re-entry.

Jet spurts of nitrogen struggled to stabilize the pod as it plunged. He pulled himself into the shell draft and stood up on the payload housing using the Kevlar leash for stability. Like a surfer, he flexed his quadriceps and waved his arms for balance to absorb the buffeting. The exertion was agony.

An orange haze surrounded him. Bright flashes sputtered over the heat shield as it shed insulation. Standing, squatting, then kneeling, his legs burned and trembled. Like Atlas, the world's gravity pushed him down with planet-sized force. Bodily movement—however slight—released a

tantrum from the steering jets as they corrected for small shifts in his weight.

50 km

The deceleration continued as the inferno subsided; the aeroshell's fire now an ember halo. The suit's swelter settled back to its swampy 35° C as the mesosphere faded to cool black. With the steady airflow of terminal velocity, Uri floated up and away from the carbon-striped pod. Its drogue chute shot past him and pulled taught, easing the turbulence.

10 km

A laughing camel icon cued him to pull the release. He jettisoned the pod and watched it sail off into gray cloudscares. Fawzi had assured him his trajectory would follow Zliva and Pravo through the flight's last segment after separation. Uri wasn't so sure.

He tumbled to gain bearing, flapping his arms like a bird. Torrents of wind replaced the airless quiet. Monsoon nimbus scattered until water-filled curtains merged then dissolved to reveal a murky green coastline. The orange circle of pod's parachute opened up, its cyclopean vent eyeing him from below.

2 km

A snoring crocodile warned of main chute release. The meteoric ride was over. Uri felt the snap of suspension lines and the soft bounce of reinforced nylon. Steam wafted off the soot-stained white of the suit's thermal armor. Cool relief. A purge of fluorescent glycol squirted down his legs from the overworked condensers. Uri decoupled the slung coolant tank and let it plummet.

He closed his eyes, desperately wanting a cigarillo and a nap. He thought of the treacherous overland journey short-circuited by the ludicrously risky jump. Smug, he couldn't wait to send a communiqué to Sayyid.

Cockiness vanished as he clumsily steered the ram-air into the coastline's wall of jungle. He looked around. The deflated titian of the pod's parachute was nowhere. A rain-soaked gust funneled him into a limestone cleft of the mountainous cliffs. He flipped up his visor and scanned the gloom for anywhere to land. A perch of Hellenic ruins offered level ground.

Touchdown.

Uri's chute snagged a tree branch. The limb dragged him over limestone towards the precipice. Just shy of the edge, Uri half-dangled from his harness like a spastic marionette, finally catching a foothold. Clambering back, he collapsed underneath a copse of palms near an ancient marble pillar.

He pulled his helmet off and inhaled the rainforest's coolness. Resting on a bed of leafy ferns, he looked out over drizzle-swept Aegean one thousand meters below.

"Beautiful dirt!" He picked up a handful to the smell the loam. "I never thought I'd miss goddamned dirt."

Half a kilometer away, beyond the mussel encrusted shore, sat a treeless islet encircled by mats of kelp. The pod's shredded chute was draped over the sea rocks like a flag, the pod bobbing in the idle surf.

The comfort of solid ground would be short-lived.

[NB] CHAPTER SIX
December 2163 C.E.

Mount Beerenberg loomed out from the sour mist like Dante's Purgatory, a yellow half-melted heap of snow and soot. The landing strip was strewn with the rusted husks of previous failed visits to Jan Mayen. A few klicks past the potholed runway stood the vault's goiter-like seamount, jutting into the sickly sea. Nicknamed the "Crown of Thorns" by Sava's men, the redoubt's spiny iron clung to the basalt tooth. The one-year contract charged Sava's men with defense of the citadel, a long time to be stuck on a four hundred square kilometer island.

Alkonost renegotiated the contract after the loss of the squad in Kharkov, to assure the client—whomever they happened to be—that the vault would be adequately defended. Alkonost included extra auto-cannons, remote sentries, and radar trackers as part of the deal to compensate for the lack of manpower. Though grateful for the additional hardware, Sava would rather have had the company.

Sava's squad spent the rainy afternoon unloading the Antonov, a job made miserable by the breakdown of the island's propane loader. Mach salvaged a wheelbarrow from a derelict shipping container, but the going was slow and painful. The installation crew helped only as long as it took to clear the plane's cargo bays, anxious to leave Jan Mayen.

"Ugly place, this," Sava said to the pilot as he walked around plane for the pre-flight check.

"What's that?" the pilot replied, checking the forward landing strut.

"Have you ever flown here before?"

"Once, a couple of years back. The weather was different then—colder, windier, wet sloppy snow," he said, looking at the jaundiced flanks of Beerenberg.

"A bit more challenging aviation-wise?"

"We had it easy this morning. The wind patterns at the high latitudes have stagnated this month. Visibility's crap, but flying below the deck is never a problem," the pilot explained.

"Then how'd that happen?" Sava pointed to a crashed Halo with Alkonost markings near the end of the runway, its eight rotor blades contorted and snapped like a smashed spider.

"Haven't a clue," shrugged the pilot.

"When did it happen?"

"Good question. It might have been under an escort contract." He nodded towards the Crown of Thorns. "Norsk-StatOil was the prime contractor for that thing."

Sava headed down the gravel ramp to the ruined vehicle, curious flotsam among what he considered to be typical jetsam. The beast lay on its side, the cockpit glass splintered into eggshell cracks. He pried open a shredded belly hatch and climbed into the wreckage.

A jungle of frayed wiring dangled from panel covers. Sava crawled forward into the cockpit. The back of the pilot's seat was a constellation of bullet holes, yellowed stuffing pulled out by the island's rodent population. Sava guessed the Mi-26 hadn't been airborne long, the crash not severe enough to kill the whole crew. There was a struggle right before it went down; detritus and

shriveled offal were everywhere, and it looked as if a body exploded in the navigator's seat. The instrumentation was smeared with the baked-in residue of bloody handprints from an electrical fire.

Sava kicked around the pile of debris in the bottom of the upended hull. A spent halon canister lay near the pilot's seat. A shadow of the un-charred panel marked where it'd been used. The crew and cargo compartment were stripped. The extra fuel pods were bone dry as well as the hydraulic reservoirs; the salvage team was a highly efficient bunch. He knocked a floor grate loose and pulled the high-G case from its rack. The flight-log cartridge was missing, along with everything else of value.

Draped by a cargo net, Sava uncovered a jump seat and noticed its tangled harness. The tamper-proof buckle remained intact, its wireless lock still engaged. He fingered the frayed nylon, a nice clean cut. It was a typical transport seat used to move prisoners around the battlefield. Sava glanced around the dim fuselage looking for the knife. Several pairs of shiny rodent eyes peered up at him with suspicion. He found nothing. Lighting a cigarette he pondered the scene but was interrupted by someone calling his name outside.

"What brought this down?" Mach asked.

"Not sure," Sava replied, climbing out a gunner's hatch. "Probably a mechanical failure. Maintaining the Mi-26's is always touch-and-go; spare parts hard to come by... or..."

"Yeah? Or?"

"Or someone broke loose from the inside, grabbed a firearm off a guard, and killed the crew."

Mach laughed. "You're a conspiracy nut."

"This rotor-craft was at low elevation when it went down," Sava continued, ignoring the jab. "Not much bulkhead damage. Even the landing struts are intact. The prisoner probably had a knife hidden, cut through the straps, and took out the crew with a small firearm."

"Yeah, maybe. The brief didn't say anything about prior incidents on Jan Mayen," Mach said.

"It didn't, eh?" Sava said, pointing his cigarette at the spiny fortress. "Do you know what we're supposed to be guarding? Did they brief you?"

"No. It was blacked out in the mission dossier. You know that."

"They don't tell us a lot, do they?" Sava winked.

"Good point. How long do you think it's been here?"

Sava shook his head and shrugged. "Hard to say. By the looks of those other heaps," he said, nodding at the bent and twisted aircraft carcasses littering the field, "the salt fog and egg stink of this place can turn metal to slag in short order. Nothing but a little rust on this Halo; it hasn't been here long, maybe a month or two."

Mach's radio crackled to life informing them the Antonov was about to take off. The massive transport wobbled as it taxied to the gravel ramp, its four turbofans screaming like banshees as it revved for takeoff. A spray of grit and vapor engulfed them as they shielded their eyes from the jet wash. The last time Sava remembered a take-off so hurried, he was shuttling Moldavan diplomats out of a besieged airstrip in the Carpathians. The threat of a direct shelling was understandable

there, but on Jan Mayen, the only mortars were delivered by the ass-end of guillemots.

"Didn't know we were such shitty company."

"Don't take it personally, Mach," Sava smirked. "Maybe they'll circle around, come back and bomb us. Do us a favor, eh?"

Mach laughed.

The plane disappeared into the tea-green haze, wispy contrails marking its wake. Mach checked the orbital weather report from Al' Madinah, a world-service provided by the mysterious caliphate. A brief dead zone was forecast for the Denmark Strait. Anoxic levels were predicted to hover below a hundred feet for a week or more, an asphyxiating inconvenience.

A rainsquall moved in from the northeast. They hurried to move their heaps of gear up to the thorny fortress, trying to stay ahead of the front. Lugging a few tons of hardware while wearing bulky hoods was a misery best avoided.

"At least we've double rations... for awhile," Mach said, trying to bring levity to the situation.

Sava said nothing, staring into an algae-filled lagoon nearby.

"Lonely place."

"We can only hope, eh? Maybe they just hurried our retirement, a bunch of weathered vets gone to seek their island paradise. Hell, they've already given us a lethal dose of arthritis, or whatever this shit is." Sava pointed at his scars.

"Almost healed?"

"Whatever 'healed' means."

Sava looked at his arm. The marks were raised and rigid, but the irritation and erythema was gone. Despite Alkonost's official briefing, Sava

found it hard not to think about the surgery and Morosov's hand in the matter. Experimental inoculations were risky, and the corporation had a spotty track record for prototyped biologics, as Sava had witnessed firsthand. Against doctor's orders, he'd drunk a half-bottle of Stolichnaya the night before they'd flown to Kharkov from Tiraspol. It'd made the recovery a painfully disorienting ordeal, but it eased the dread.

Sava wondered: If a microbial menace existed on Jan Mayen and it was lethal, why would someone need Alkonost to guard it? A few warning signs painted with the universal skull-and-crossbones would have easily done the trick, a symbol even the most devolved primates would heed.

"Let's move in."

[NB] CHAPTER SEVEN

February 2156 C.E.

Lieutenant Uri Vitko lit a cigarillo and ran a hand over his shaved head. The rainy season had brought lice, and with them came mandated haircuts and carbaryl showers. After the outbreak and delousing, he'd decided skinhead was worthy haute couture for the Carpathian muck. The utility of the style—or lack thereof—had grown on him. Every week he lathered and shaved himself bald, a ritual as routine as cleaning his rifle. Vanity, Uri concluded, was a Pre-Shock commodity.

He squinted and peered into the field scope, looking for anything out of the ordinary. Through the saffron haze of wood smoke, he saw the outline of the dam. A mortar barrage had chipped away the superstructure's flanks. Black water from the reservoir sluiced over a line of jagged concrete and protruding rebar, streaking the mottled gray with foam.

No longer a living lake, the reservoir was choked with timber and manmade debris, an effective barrier against the enemy. The logjam was a graveyard for those misfortunate enough to have fallen into the armada of deadfall. Most were tribal scavengers—some women and children—tempted by the floating junkyard's salvage. A few were barbarian saboteurs, eager to rupture the dam's foundation with depth charges. Fortunately for Alkonost, none were successful.

Occasionally a bloated body, tangled in the rotting snarl, would slip over the spillway and tumble into the estuary below, contaminating it.

Recruits were assigned to dislodge the corpses from the lower riverbank. The stench of decay was nauseating. For weeks after, the taste of the mercenary's meals would be ruined, his palettes corrupted by the putrid taint.

The monitor's parabolic dish detected an acoustic anomaly above the dam. From the vantage of Uri's bunker, little could be seen through the foothills' cloud forests. Raspy wheezing and throaty gurgling, the sounds were semi-human. The larger fauna of the Ceahlau Massif, wild boar and the wolves that preyed on them, had vanished into higher altitudes. This was something else, possibly bait for a Carpi ambush. Someone was going to have to reconnoiter: cross the dam's rickety catwalk and hike up to the ridgeline. Uri needed a "volunteer."

"Let's head out," Uri ordered, strapping on his ammo vest.

"You're serious, just the two of us? What about the rest of that lot?" Krajnik pointed to the room full of intel grunts, eyes glued to screens of colorless flicker.

"Three's a crowd, and I don't want to draw attention," Uri said, stuffing a few clips into empty pockets. "We're mission intelligence; it's our job."

The two mercenaries left the stuffy bunker and its LED glow of humming radio receivers and computer racks. The misty air turned to a steady drizzle. Uri and Krajnik put on their berets and set out down the muddy switchbacks for the dam.

Specialist Krajnik was wary. "Did you here about Lieutenant Sava Valis a few weeks ago? The Carpis laid a trap and captured him along with a couple of other guys. Mach and I broke free, then doubled

back to rescue them. This could be the same trap. It's happening more often, a new tactic."

"I'm well aware."

"You should've seen how they tortured them... grisly business," Krajnik continued, shaking his head.

"I've read the reports."

"Sava is still recovering. He hasn't been quite right—" Krajnik tapped his temple, "—in the head."

"I know. I get the briefings." Uri hiked ahead of his comrade.

The spillway's footbridge swayed under the mercenaries' weight. Violent jostling slowed their pace to baby steps. Uri tried not to look down at the rushing cascade, instead focusing on the dam's far side. He reached for the rusted railing—careful not lean into it—and advised Krajnik to do the same. Flaked carnelian coated his fingerless gloves. They needed to hurry; the banshee screechings were fading to moans as night fell.

"Where's it coming from?" asked Krajnik.

"About two kilometers along the shore and up to the right." Uri pointed into the gloom. "That's where it was the loudest."

They crossed to the generator powerhouse, and then paused at the dam's administrative building to meet a shivering duty sergeant. Uri informed him of their intent then asked him about enemy activity.

"A Second Brigade half-track passed through on the ring road earlier this afternoon to lay mines. But they didn't look like demolitions to me," the sergeant said, his caffeine-fueled eyes blurred with exhaustion. "Relief's supposed to come in an hour along with a hydroelectric team to repair turbine five. Other than that, it's been quiet."

"Can you monitor this encrypted channel?" Uri said, pointing at his console screen.

"Why?" the sergeant asked, squinting at the frequency band.

"Just in case. We're going to check something out."

"What exactly?" the sergeant asked, slumping against a pile of sandbags.

"An acoustic disturbance," Krajnik smirked.

The sergeant glanced up the hill. "I've been hearing weird things all afternoon. Screams, low howls—it's hard to tell with the smog."

Uri nodded. "We picked it up on the monitors." He pointed back at the bunker, a dab of gray on the eastern hill's olive drab. "When did it start?"

"Hard to say. After the mine detail came back through sometime."

"Interesting," Uri paused. "Thanks soldier." He pulled out a half-ration of cigarettes and set them next to the sergeant. The man thanked him with tip of his cap, and they were off.

They followed the tracks of the APC's twin herringbones, its path swerving to avoid the husks of ancient automobiles. Little remained of the road past the dam. Collapsed culverts left only a single lane, the adjacent asphalt broken and brittle. Twilight shadows spilled into narrow ravines, shapes fading to stenciled black. Uri flipped on his shoulder lamp and panned the road's mossy carpet. Above, yearling alder crowded the road like a tunnel, the lumber-choked reservoir barely visible beyond.

Half a kilometer from the roadblock the tracks stopped, surrounded by the tread of combat boots. Krajnik walked a few meters further with his

magnetometer and adjusted its sensitivity. Idle pings suggested the area was free of land mines.

"There's a footpath just off the road, up the hill here," Uri said, unclipping his lamp. He waved the torch's white cone past the ditch.

"No dubious potholes, no suspicious branch piles, and the magnetometer isn't picking anything up. They might have deployed ceramic mines, but I doubt it," Krajnik reported, folding up the detector's wiry inductors.

"The whole mine thing is probably a cover. They were up to something else."

"Why don't we radio command, get the scoop on operations near the reservoir?"

"Those guys don't know shit." Uri motioned for Krajnik to follow him. "Shall we?"

Rooted streambeds served as a trail, faint animal paths providing portage in between the gullies. The going was hard and the elevation gain was cruelly efficient. Uri looked for clues of Carpi movement: bivouacs, campfires, a deer carcass... but saw nothing. Besides the odd divot, the forest floor's pine needles were pristine.

Uri heard it, a steady drone above the clamor of the hike. He stopped, killed his lamp, and pumped his fist, signaling for Krajnik to hold. Both crouched and surveyed the forest. The Vepr's infrared scope offered little, so Uri closed his eyes to listen. He heard a chorus of moans, stygian and subhuman. A general unease gave way to a cold sweat. Krajnik's head darted squirrel-like, the stillness fed a nascent panic.

"What the fuck is that?" Krajnik croaked.

Uri put his forefinger to his lip. Wary of another holothane ambush, they pulled their gasmasks from their kits and strapped on the

goggled shrouds. Careful not to trigger trip lines or mantraps, they crept off the trail and slowly traversed the ridge. After a few hundred meters, their track ended in a limestone overhang. Below, a hollow of fern and spruce surrounded a reed-choked pond. Two human shapes, dressed in white gowns, knelt facing each other. Their bestial bellowing filled the clearing with a sickening disharmony.

"I just see the two of them down by the water," Krajnik said, rifle locked to his shoulder, eyes squinting into the scope. "A male and a female, both adults, unarmed."

"They're wearing a headdress... a mask," Uri added.

They probed the dusk for signs of movement, assuring no enemy lay in wait. Unless the Carpi recruited wood sprites as sylvan spies, Uri was confident their trek had gone unnoticed. This wasn't a trap; this was something else entirely. Krajnik attached the black cylinder of a silencer to his rifle. Uri shook his head as he reached over and pushed the shroud downward.

"Give it a few minutes. I'm curious."

"You're curious, I'm horrified. I say we liquidate the Carpi sideshow and get back to Bicz for a round of horilka," Krajnik said, frustrated.

"This isn't a Carpi sideshow," Uri said, pulling off his hood. "It's no coincidence the Second Brigade happened to stop at the trailhead when this all started. This is Alkonost's doing."

Krajnik took off his mask, his brow furrowed. Uri—done waiting—crept down the rock ledge and approached the duo. He cracked a flare and tossed it in between the two; neither reacted to the sudden glare. What the flickering magenta revealed

disgusted both mercenaries. Krajnik hiccupped, belched, and turned away. Uri shielded his nose in repulsion.

"Holy Nicholas! What the Christ!"

The man and woman's heads were misshapen. Corrugated sub-dermal tubes distended the flesh, perforating the scalp and face in ways horrific and ghoulish. The growths permeated their craniums; eye sockets crowded with bowed tentacles, ears punctured by coils of writhing black appendages. They were victims of some preternatural tumor, the malignancy mimicking an undersea animal.

Chained by their hands and feet, they tugged at each other, slobbering yellow mucous and screaming like brainless inhuman creatures. Krajnik pulled the bolt release and pointed his rifle at the female, ready to execute. Uri ordered him to hold. Instinct begged him to destroy the abominations, but the wretched couple demanded a thorough investigation.

"It's like a parasite's gotten inside them or something... What the fuck, lieutenant?"

"Easy now."

Uri moved in closer. Both were Carpi barbarians of the local warrior clan, their Romany tattoos still visible around the throat and clavicle. The remnants of the woman's matted hair covered her engorged neck, but Uri noticed a set of chrome taps—angry with infection—protruding from the man's vertebral column. He guessed the implants were a biologic hardware of Sevastpol manufacture, but had no clue as to their purpose.

"These pathetic creatures were dumped here," Uri concluded.

"By who?"

Uri shrugged. "My guess? Second Brigade, on an errand. They're prisoners; they were interned. Look at the chip scars in what's left of their necks." He pinpointed the blue-black marks with his Vepr's laser sight.

"Why would anyone bother to drag them up a hillside, so close to enemy lines?"

"Because the enemy was meant to find them, not us. It's a warning to the Carpis, a throwback to good ol' Vlad the Impaler. Makes one wonder who the real barbarians are."

"Who let them get this way? Jesus, why weren't they euthanized and limed in the pit near the city's football pitch?"

Uri shrugged as he circled around the atrocious exhibition. "Standard business practices would dictate this sort of experiment-gone-wrong would fall under the hush-hush classification. Operation Trajan is Alkonost's biggest contract and unpopular among Nova Byzantium's senators. If a picture of these things ever showed up on the streets of Constantinople, sentiment would turn against Moldovan hegemony. That's my guess."

Krajnik nodded, pursing his lips.

"As for your other question..." Uri paused. "Who's in charge of I-and-I at the brig now?"

"Captian Zelinski, an old intel chief, he took over after the last offensive."

"It might be time to pay the captain a visit, sort out what Intelligence and Interrogation's been up to."

"He outranks you. It might be hard to get answers, especially from I-and-I."

"Mission intelligence, agent privilege, remember? If he's not cooperative, I'll mention the pictures."

"What pictures?"

"The ones we're taking now." Uri winked, miming a camera.

"Ah, Got it." Krajnik returned the wink. The specialist took a sip from his canteen and crouched to examine the pair. "Sklar used to tell me about how the Saharan legions tortured their enemies with Guinea worms, hundreds of parasites trying to wiggle their way out, excruciating and deadly. What do you think?"

"No, this is synthetic. Probably some concoction from the Crimea, maybe Morosov. I've seen those chrome implants before."

"They're hideous."

They paused to admire the ghastly handiwork, held spellbound by the pathology.

"All right, let's get busy." Uri grew impatient as he checked his watch. They needed to get off the mountain. "We can't leave them here for their Carpi comrades to find. Grab your trencher and start digging a pit. We're going to burn them."

Afraid to touch the creatures, Uri grabbed the Carpis' chains and dragged them uphill and away from the pond's sodden bog. Krajnik gasped then vomited. There was something hidden under the man's soiled gown: his severed feet half-immersed in a pool of coagulating blood. Someone had hacked them off, a ruthless hobbling. The blood loss explained the man's pallor. Acting as an anchor, he held them both to the ground. Someone wanted to make sure they didn't move.

Uri urged Krajnik to gather himself and start digging. They worked to clear a shallow depression, filling it with armloads of brittle twigs and thermite powder extracted from a grenade. With a heave, Uri lugged the Carpis onto

the pyre. Like grotesque infants, they grabbed and pulled at each other in a spastic embrace, saliva-drenched mouths yammering. Uri picked up and tossed a lit flare into the stack. A vortex of flame erupted, engulfing the creatures in a burst of magnesium. The supercharged heat reduced the biomass to cinder with furious speed.

Uri radioed the dam's duty sergeant and arranged for transport. "If we hustle, we can ride back with the relief crew. Let's get the hell out of here, tonight's horilka is on me."

"Thank God."

#

The industrial park sat in the oxbow of the lower Bicz River, a few kilometers behind the front lines. Its glass and steel girders were of sturdy construction, a center for business back when the world worked differently. Inside were the hallmarks of commerce, nests of long-gone computer workstations now converted to military function. In the halcyon days of the global network, it might've been anything; a software mill, a gaming lounge, an electronic stock exchange, but now it was an Alkonost brig, set up for interrogation.

Uri tapped the end of his cigarillo. With no ashtray, he deposited the cinders onto the nylon Berber. He was sure no one would mind; the coffee-stained carpet was already filthy with footprints. He checked his watch again; the captain was ten minutes overdue. An armored column had clogged Bicz's narrow highway, the traffic snarl slowing Captain Zelinski's arrival.

"The captain should be here momentarily. Coffee?"

"Sure."

The officer took Uri's canteen thermos, limped over to a brew canister, and filled it to the brim. Uri took a sip from the threaded mouth. Despite the plastic bitterness, the hot beverage was welcome relief from the morning's cold wet.

"Lieutenant Sava Valis, I read your mission debrief. It's good to see you returned to duty after your ordeal," Uri said.

"I was lucky, just a few scrapes," Sava's boyishness betrayed outward signs of post-traumatic stress. "There's been a rash of similar abductions lately, did you hear? The Carpis have discovered a new niche for their barbarity."

"Right, the two squads up near the Bucovina Front."

"Staked, buried alive, ritual beheadings, paralyzed with needles, all that Neanderthal shit..."

"I know, I read the briefing details," Uri cut the lieutenant off from his macabre list.

"Superstitious bastards. The madness just goes on and on, doesn't it?"

Uri nodded, anxious to change the subject. "So what does Zelinski have you doing?"

"I'm an interrogations auditor now, for I-and-I. I've been working with Morosov to set up a new technology, an alpha-wave construct extracted from neural tap radiation. It's crude at the moment, but Sevastopol says refinements are ongoing. We're trying to build a database." Sava shrugged. "I'd rather be out in the slog, but for now..."

"The Illithium technology... the captain's informed me. I'm here to observe a session."

"Speak of the wolf..."

The clinking rumble of a tracked vehicle came to a halt outside. Captain Zelinski, a slight man,

thin, graying, yet confident, appeared at the door with his security team. He shook Uri's hand firmly and engaged in the small-talk niceties typically absent from grunt-speak. Alkonost's higher brass were more "business" than mercenary, salesmen always trying to keep the conflict sold.

Sava inspected Uri's lanyard to insure he held the necessary clearances for the auditing session, then led the group through an empty warehouse into a shielded chamber. Inside, stands of bright lights filled the metal room. A phalanx of tables divided the space, each piled high with black boxes and monitoring equipment. The racks were cabled to a tripod of globular eyestalks, heavy with lenses and electrical apertures. The whole mess had an insect feel.

In the center of the metal room sat a modified jump seat cannibalized from a Hind. Kevlar straps and key-locked buckles draped the empty chair. A padded bracket, typical of tactical aircraft, protruded from the headrest. Uri examined the polished aluminum floor, antiseptic and clean, not a bloodstained splotch anywhere. It was too sterile, especially for an interrogation house.

"Lieutenant Uri Vitko, one of our field agents in mission intelligence, will be joining us for this session," Zelinski announced.

A group of men in civilian attire nodded as Uri sat down in a box of seats near the wall. He guessed they were Morosov, his suspicions confirmed when a wiry uncomfortable man stood to introduce himself.

"For Vitko's sake, I'd like to give a brief overview of Illithium, a byproduct of our pharmacological and pathology research—if that's all right with Captain Zelinski..." The nervous

man's suit was wrinkled and damp with sweat. He looked anxious to get the hell out of Bicz.

"Please, Mr. Popov, we could all use a refresher, so..." Zelinski said, leaning back in a swivel chair.

"Intended as neurological treatment, Morosov Svestpol—specifically Morosov Labs in Constantinople, with help from our support facilities, found that the synaptic assemblers coupled inductively and are capable of broadcasting a massive amount of coherent alpha-wave fields in the UHF. The unique magnetic signature was essentially the modulated kernel of short-term memory."

Uri tried to follow the technical jargon but soon lost the lecture's thread. From what he gathered, there was no "question and answer" in this grilling technique. Alkonost I-and-I had contracted the Morosov headshrinkers to deploy this "passive" system on the enemy as an experiment. From their arsenal of electrical gizmos, they recorded brain activity and stored the information in high-density columns of optical encoders. Outside the electro-magnetically shielded chamber, an arsenal of computers processed the vast amounts of alpha-wave data into memory fragments, images, and sounds.

Devoid of the interrogator's subtle manipulations and mind games, removing the human element from the process seemed inherently flawed. Uri was skeptical. The method was cumbersome and expensive, despite Popov's attempt to reassure the room that Morosov was continuing to streamline the technology.

"After the network has fully matured inside the neocortex, a few milliamps into the medulla taps

will stimulate modulation and amplify the passive currents. If somebody could bring the subject in?" Popov continued, pushing up his spectacles.

On cue, two guards carried in a manacled Carpi, twitchy and frightened. Prisoners were not typically put on starvation diets, but the barbarian's gaunt appearance shocked Uri, sharp cheekbones, knobby knees, sunken pelvis. The guards sat the man down and secured him to the chair. Fly-eyed goggles were fastened to his head, greasy electrodes clamped against his skull.

"Where was this subject acquired, officer?"

"Twenty clicks south by a reconnaissance team working the Tarcaului corridor," Sava responded, reading the dossier from a monitor. "No name given, male subject is twenty-five years old, estimated, suffers from tuberculosis, and is a past victim of gangrene. Note the truncated digits."

"Thank you, lieutenant."

Sava nodded.

"Here on the medial aspects of the neck, Sava has implanted the taps." Popov highlighted the sides of the prisoner's neck with a pointer. The marks were different than those on the two deformed Carpis, the taps imitating a vampire's bite instead. "If Lieutenant Sava Valis could amplify the connection, we'll begin."

Popov attached chrome jumpers to the Carpi's neck, then the lights were dimmed. A strobe, tight and focused, washed over the Carpi's face, slack jawed and vacant. He mumbled slobbery gibberish in his native tongue as his muscles relaxed.

"To provoke associative memory, we start the hypnotic process, cuing the vestigial mind with fight-or-flight triggers to prompt output. Of

course, the fresher the experiences, the more resolution," Popov explained.

Ruby laser light spread out over the hemispheres of the prisoner's lenses, non-Euclidean shapes gyrating to inaudible music. The effect was nauseating. The Carpi's jaw fell wide as the trance took hold, his limp tongue panting like a dog.

"Now fully engaged, we phase the radio frequency transceivers and collect the stimulated emissions from the lensing cranium," Popov narrated.

As the process continued, the multi-colored lights changed tempo as the machines cycled through preprogramming. The room was uncomfortably quiet except for the animal mutter from the hypnotized Carpi. Minutes later, the lights came up and the oscillating beam dimmed. Technicians huddled around Sava's workstation to await the results.

"The current processing suite has significant lag, but we're reworking the software for organic substrates and cellular tissues. The repackaging should shrink everything while increasing the run time with no post-processing overhead. It will be real-time," Popov concluded.

Uri was invited to take a look at Sava's monitors. Shards of half-rendered images scrolled across the screen, overdubbed with the digitized muddle of Carpi speech. Stupefied by the technology's ability to read a human mind, Uri was, nevertheless, curious how any of it led to actionable intelligence.

"Interesting, but this... static, it could be anything, couldn't it?" Uri asked, lighting a cigarillo.

"They say recent short-term memories are easier to render." Sava toggled through the catalogue of mental muck. "Recently, we've been able to pinpoint a few enemy encampments and supply trails using the images."

The session complete, two guards led the prisoner out of the chamber. Uri asked the captain to show him the brig. Zelinski escorted Uri outside the metal room, up a flight of stairs, and to a crowded hallway filled with manacles and non-lethal weapons racks. Peeking through slits of safety glass, Uri moved from cell to cell.

"Looking for something in particular, Lieutenant Vitko?" asked the confused captain.

"Right here. Look." Uri pointed into one of the cells. "Guard, can you let us in?"

"That one's on the outs," replied the guard.

"Lieutenant Vitko, as a mission intelligence officer in the field, I can understand your interest in I-and-I's techniques, but it seems you have a wild hair up your ass about something. As CO of this facility, I'd sure as hell like to know what it is?"

"Do you know what happens to the prisoners after the Morosov treatment?" Uri gestured to the catatonic Carpi slumped in the empty cell. "Look." He crouched near the scrawny prisoner and pulled back a lock of matted hair. "These playthings of yours are terminal, aren't they? None of them live through this."

Zelinski shook his head and turned away. The veins of the prisoner's neck and forehead bulged black and wormlike. It was the early stages of the syndrome. Like the two in the Carpathian woods, the barbarian's forebrain had detached, locked away in its cranial prison.

"Damn it. The techs are supposed to be giving them a shot of potassium chloride when they get like this," the captain complained. "Unfortunately, as the network grows, it metastasizes like a cancer. It just keeps going and going. Morosov hasn't found a way to stop it. This guy should have been euthanized and disposed of properly."

"Captain, permission to speak freely?" Uri stomped out his cigarillo then stood to face the unnerved Zelinski.

"Please."

"Someone—I can only assume under your command—has been dumping these zombies up in the hills, near the borderlands. I was on patrol near the dam when I found two of these vile things, but in a far more advanced condition," Uri explained. "Are you aware?"

"No. My men are under strict orders."

"I-and-I is known for running a tight ship, but it has some leaks. I don't want to go up the chain of command with this but—"

"Are you threatening me?"

"No. Listen, captain, with these recent abductions, Alkonost in Moldova has been under a lot of stress. There's been a backlash, I realize that, but dangling these things out like scarecrows in revenge... it's dangerous, and rather than scattering the Capris, it'll have the opposite affect. There's also the political issue with Constantinople. Trajan is unpopular."

"My men are top notch, they've been vetted by Tiraspol, all with Level Four accesses, I..."

"What about Lieutenant Sava Valis? He's a highly decorated combat veteran, but he was a victim of these Carpi abductions. Do you think he...?"

The captain shook his head. "No. I know Sava, and he doesn't have it in him."

"Fine. I'm leaving on furlough in the spring-back to Tiraspol for another contract. I've a vested interest in the success of this campaign, as we all do. Lots of my close comrades have died in the Carpathians, and it'd be a shame to see it derailed, snarled in bad publicity," Uri stepped into the hallway as the guard locked the cell behind them.

"Thanks for your candor, lieutenant. This matter will be quickly resolved, I assure you. I appreciate your coming to me directly," Zelinski said, shaking his hand. "The guard will escort you out."

"Vae Victus." Uri saluted. "Woe to the conquered."

Zelinski saluted back. "Forem Byzantium, Forem Justinian, Forem Alkonost."

[NB] CHAPTER EIGHT
September 2163 C.E.

Another beep woke Uri from his restless sleep. The helmet's oxygen monitor had been alerting him all night. The Hellespont's methane flush was typical of the Black Sea's out-gassing, rarely lethal, but debilitating near sea level. He switched off the alarm and rose from the warped sun lounger, rubbing his arms to warm himself.

Plants had overtaken the centuries-old seaside resort, succulent vines and monsoon-fed philodendrons claiming the decayed hallways. Stripped to the brass plumbing, not much remained. On the top floor, Uri found a suite with an intact sliding door and a view of the gray Aegean from the deck. The drywall had dissolved, but the cracked tiling and sodden particleboard were sturdy enough to hold his weight.

Thirty-six hours after re-entry, and Uri was famished. Most edible fish in the northern Aegean were extinct and the saltwater quaggas were toxic with the ever-present bacteria bloom. Bat-nibbled oranges in the hotel's citrus grove proved indigestible, and he didn't have the constitution to kebab a lizard, at least not yet. If he could just reach the pod's emergency rations...

The helmet stunk of sweat, but with his enrichment hood still in the pod—along with everything else—it was his only defense against hypoxia. Besides gulps of rainwater, Uri was forced to continually wear the headpiece. The orange parachute was only a hundred-meter swim from shore, but the atmosphere was uncooperative.

The climb down the limestone cliffs had exhausted him, and he was too drained to lash together a raft.

Above the sound of lapping waves came the bumblebee whir of an outboard. His orbital console was locked inside the pod's inner compartment along with the rest of his kit. Agent protocol was to establish a link with Al Fadah Madina and upload his location. Fawzi, using Sayyid's sluggish encryptor, had primed Miriam with Uri's expected approach; nothing exact, nothing accurate. But this was not Miriam; this was someone else.

Kicking through a pile of junk, Uri spotted the ruffled gleam of a plastic trash bag. Tearing off a piece, he leapfrogged down the hotel's ramshackle stairwell and darted for the beach. He realized he had no choice; he had to swim it. Scavengers or sea gypsies, they'd spotted the orange parachute on descent and were approaching to investigate.

He pulled off the helmet and separated the oxygen absorber/remitter from the filter. Wrapping and cinching it with the plastic remnant and a piece of wire, he stuffed the package inside his suit liner for the swim. By the time he reached the rock, he wouldn't have the extra time to crack the pod and rummage for his hood. After a few helmet-less breaths, he was already lightheaded.

Entangling kelp swirled in the frigid water. Uri pushed the floating helmet out ahead as he swam. Rolling waves hid the horizon. His pace was slow. With each stroke he fought harder to stay on the surface. Halfway to the islet, and Uri's extremities tingled with hypoxia. Underwater, the

whir of propellers waxed and waned in the current, but the pitch was shifting, getting closer.

A snarl of kelp sprouted from the cloudy green as the sea floor rose up to meet him. He scraped the mottled bottom and barnacled rocks as a heaving wave threw him onto the rocks. With numb fingers, Uri clumsily reassembled the filter and slipped on the seaweed-draped helmet. He gasped and flopped onto the uneven rocks like a sunning iguana. The queasy panting slowed as the fire of oxygen-filled corpuscles spilled into his extremities.

After a respite, Uri crawled onto a limestone plinth and found the frayed lines of the pod's main chute. A few tugs and the bobbing cylinder washed up onto a submerged shelf. He wrestled the payload from a tide pool and punched the cypherlock's stainless keys. The pod hissed as its clamshell opened. Underneath Zliva and Pravo's duffel was a molded case containing his weapons and kit. Relieved, Uri slipped on his enrichment hood and threw the awkward re-entry helmet into the sea. The orbital console's LCD flashed prompting him to upload his location. Taking a satellite reading, he punched in the latitude and longitude then hit transmit.

Uri laid out his weapons. Compared to an on-world arsenal, it was a paltry collection of non-lethals Kaliq had managed to smuggle. The spark pistol and its capacitor pellets worked at close range to shock a target. Similar to a shotgun, the pistol was for close combat but worthless in the open field. But he had another weapon. Uri assembled the collapsible iodine laser, a rifle-like device with a sight and adjustable lens. Using a honed beam, it could form a point of

blistering heat three hundred meters away. It wasn't much, but it was something.

The wake of an approaching speedboat parted the horizon, the slapping hull's rhythm growing louder. Stashing Zliva and Pravo into a protective crag, Uri squatted to make his stand. Through the weapon lens, he saw the sleek outline of a Zodiac. Centipede patrolmen, Nova Byzantium's territorial force, had detected his re-entry. As one of Al' Fadah Madina's archivist agents, his presence would certainly be unwelcome.

Uri activated the rifle and aimed. Bearing down, he discharged the laser's sizzle into the boat's inflatable rim. Black smoke wafted over the cockpit, the bow nose-diving as the pilot throttled down the engines.

Uri had their attention.

A burst from a halon extinguisher muted the fire. The two centipedes yelled at each other in confusion. Steadying his aim, he bore down again, ready to unleash more infrared havoc. Before he could fire, the boat turned and slid out of sight behind a point of land, the engine hum giving way to a watery quiet.

The centipedes' retreat was suspicious. They never backed down from a fight. Uri rarely dealt with the empire's army. Alkonost, by Nova Byzantium's Justinian Code, was forbidden from imperial territory. The Transnistrian mercenaries were dealt with in the manner of a foreign legion, a necessary evil kept at arm's length. Alkonost's lack of loyalty was a political asset, as well as a liability. With nothing more than a signed contract and a promise, Constantinople was weary of the Tiraspol's Hessians. The dirty work of interior paramilitary duty, tax enforcement,

border security, and counter-insurgency was left to the centipedes. Recruited from the Marmara and Anatolia heartland, they were imperialists loyal to the emperor.

Taking advantage of the uneasy lull, Uri quickly jumped into his khakis, wolfed down a protein cake, and guzzled a pouch of water. The console's locator put him one hundred fifty kilometers from Nova Byzantium's frontier on a peninsula dangling from Macedonia's udder-shaped peninsula. Sayyid's mission brief had been woefully vague, the details of his rendezvous with Miriam unclear. And how she would smuggle him into Constantinople remained a mystery.

Crosschecking his console, indicators sensed atmospheric carbon dioxide levels had fallen. Uri pulled off his hood and breathed in the marine air. Three hours into his vigil, he started to nod off.

Thunderheads swelled offshore, black walls of rain rinsing and recycling the Aegean's sulfide waters. A bolt of lightning woke him. The storm's downdraft churned with low pressure, the breeze chilled Uri's sweaty face and neck. He checked his console again. An alphanumeric receipt confirmed his transmission. "No new communiqués," flashed on the read-out.

With the storm front came the second wave, two Zodiacs this time, reinforcements. Like hailstones, bullets clicked against the sea rocks. Taking cover, Uri cued the charger and aimed the laser. He was outgunned. A rocket flew in and exploded near the waterline. A plume of limestone dust and charred kelp spiraled up. Too much mist and optical distortion, he would have to wait for a clear shot.

The first Zodiac made a pass. Uri aimed at the driver and fired. No more a nuisance than a mosquito, the centipede batted at the annoying hotspot; his Kevlar armor pocked by nothing more than a cigar burn blemish. Uri was going to have to aim for flesh.

The gunner opened up with a gimbaled fifty caliber. The rounds spiraled in as the boat came about; it's missile rack cued to a millimeter-wave tracker. Machine gun rounds ricocheted off the craggy shoreline. Uri dove to his belly as a low-velocity rocket slammed into rock. Shrapnel arced over him, the rocket's incendiary gel splattering the islet in molten dollops. Ears ringing, Uri crawled under a lip of the limestone pillar and sought cover on the islet's leese. Agonizing seconds passed until the laser glowed green with charge. He widened the beam and rolled out to aim at the passing boat.

A trigger squeeze and the driver's head exploded, a blood cone soaking the cockpit's windshield. The boat pitched hard starboard and dumped the gunner overboard. Maybe the driver had an implant or a titanium skull plate, non-lethals—even hacked units with hyper-charged capacitors—weren't capable of such exitium ex machina. With no time to ponder, he charged the capacitor again and waited.

The second boat approached and circled, unloading a cannonade of poorly aimed lead. Again unable to get a clear shot, Uri scooted around the shoreline as the Zodiac passed, trying to avoid the gunner. Another loop and the boat shot for open water. Uri bellied down and zeroed in. A half-kilometer out, a rooster tail of froth marked its turn as the centipedes came about for another

run. Head on, there wasn't much to aim for; he'd have a better chance once the boat was broadside.

Another rocket volley exploded in the kelp beds, a geyser of brine raining down. Zooming in, he hovered the laser's blue crosshair over the pilot's head. Hoping the windshield would pass the light Uri pulled the trigger. The port outboard engine caught fire; its fuel tank ignited.

"A pox on your fucking house!" Uri hollered.

But something other than a gypsy hex was killing the enemy; someone else's hand was at work. He turned and looked up at the hazy mountains. By his estimate, there was a dead-shot sniper hidden a kilometer or more away in the jungle; there was no other explanation.

Uri pulled the spark pistol out of its holster and fired a shot into the water next to the paddling gunner. The burst of voltage electrocuted the man in a ball of submerged lightning. Out to sea, the crew of the remaining Zodiac quickly fell victim to the sharpshooter as their boat flamed over from a punctured fuel tank.

#

"You picked off two moving targets almost a kilometer away. Where did you learn to shoot like that? I thought you were a geophysicist?" Uri asked Miriam.

"I am. But I learned to shoot as a girl in Madrassah, the Persian jungles, my sisters and I used to smuggle our rifles underneath our chadors," she replied. "The mercenaries never suspected."

"How many?"

She batted a reticent eye at him, careful to keep her attention on the helm.

"How many kills?"

"As a team, my sister and I probably removed twenty to thirty Alkonost from the conflict."

"Interesting way of putting it," Uri smirked. Sayyid had been wrong about Miriam. Maybe not as feral as the raggedy men of Al' Madina's archivist stable, but for an agent, her lethality was without question. "I'm sure half those guys were my comrades, Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine."

"They had it coming to them."

"Maybe." The Alborz Engagement, Uri recalled, wasn't one of Alkonost's finer outings.

Miriam briefed him on the events that led to his rescue. She'd received Fawzi's anonymous transmission informing her of Uri's early arrival. After setting up seismic monitors on Mount Athos, she'd noticed the cloud-flash from his re-entry and the resulting sonic thunderclap. A check of the centipedes' radio sidebands revealed a patrol had been dispatched to the area. Miriam, like Uri, was in a race to find the downed pod before the centipedes.

Al' Fadah Madina insured its agents were kept apprised of the caliphate's current state of diplomatic affairs with Nova Byzantium, or the lack thereof. Miriam was aware of the ante. She'd everything to lose by abandoning Uri and his payload to Al' Madina's adversaries. After a downlink from Sayyid with Uri's position, she'd staked out the resort and intervened.

"The computer says we should be at the capital by morning."

"Enough time for a nap then," Uri yawned.

She glared at him but said nothing.

"Or... maybe not."

The catamaran heeled, the starboard keel lifting to slice the water like a knife. A few more hours

and they'd be tacking into the Hellespont. It'd be dark, but Miriam's beacon-registered under Norsk-Statoil's corporate ID-would allow them to enter Constantinople unmolested. She was skilled at sailing a twin-hull. Uri offered little as a deckhand; an occasional turn on the winch, the odd look into the radarscope; sailing wasn't his specialty.

"Do you have a lighter?" he asked, holding up a small cigar.

"Open the hatch underneath you," Miriam nodded towards his seat. "Inside the toolbox."

"This'll do." He pulled out a handheld oxy/acetylene torch, its cone of white-hot plasma burning half his cigarillo away.

Uri felt ham-fisted and uneasy in Miriam's presence. He had to admit, she was an extremely capable agent and he would've apologized to Sayyid had he known. But prejudice was an instrument of survival, and he felt no guilt. Progressive attitudes had disappeared along with notions of progress.

He leaned against the safety netting and watched her, trying to figure her out. She appeared to be a modest, petite Persian girl, but underneath she possessed a soldier's constitution. Miriam, armed with a .50-caliber sniper rifle-nearly as long as she was tall-had dispatched a patrol of heavily armed centipedes with clinical efficiency.

"When do you think they'll suspect something?"

"They already do. In a few minutes we'll be passing a Marmaran cutter headed for the site. I've been monitoring the radio chatter," she said, tapping her earpiece.

The sail bags were wet as he climbed over them and into the forward berth. A porthole -just above

the waterline—offered a narrow view of the action. Miriam reeled in the mainsail to slow the boat as the cutter's crew tossed a line over. Her Turkish was impeccable as she answered the centipede's megaphone shouts.

Similar to the Cyclones of Diego Garcia, the cutter was a sleek vessel bristling with canons and missile launchers. Painted on the hull, the venomous red and black arthropod was an intimidating splash of bow graffiti. The hundred-legged creature was the symbol of Nova Byzantium's "Centurions," a nod to the legionnaires' ancient Roman inspiration.

The hull rocked as a centipede stepped aboard to inspect the catamaran. Laying hidden in the cramped stowage, Uri saw the patrolmen's lamp from underneath canvas sheets. The man performed a cursory search, tossing around gear and knocking open hatches. With their comrades missing, contraband was a low priority. After checking Miriam's papers and asking her a few routine questions, the patrolmen quickly returned to the cutter, much to Uri's relief.

Another blast from the megaphone and the crew cast off. With a pop of the spinnaker the cat picked up speed. Miriam followed a northeasterly heading along a line of yellow strobe buoys marking the path through the Hellespont narrows.

"Your Turkish is very good," Uri complimented, stepping up the gangway into the cockpit.

"You speak Latin. Alkonost grunts aren't typically known for their skills in parley."

"I was an agent in mission intelligence, not your typical grunt. Anyway, Latin was a safer bet, the lingua franca of Nova Byzantium, 'the proper

tongue of the civilized world,' " Uri repeated mockingly.

"What's left of the 'civilized world.' Where did you study, archivist?"

"In Tiraspol, at the academy while on furlough. It was easier. I didn't have the knack for middle-eastern languages, too many dialects."

"A thinking soldier. I haven't run into many of those. Most I wouldn't call soldiers at all—pirates, highwaymen, rapists, vagabonds. Uniforms don't mean so much these days."

"I'm not a soldier, at least not anymore, thanks to Al Fadah Madina."

"Right. Speaking of which, I think Sayyid owes me something, archivist," Miriam said, hand extended.

"You can call me Uri, if you'd like."

Miriam shrugged, indifferent.

Uri reached into his fatigues and pulled out a small nylon pouch. He put the bag of clinking coins into her open palm.

"That feels about right," she said, jostling the bullion. "It's not easy sneaking Al' Madina gold into Nova Byzantium. Orbital pods are easy to spot near the frontier, as you already know."

"What did you tell them back there?"

"As little as possible. Norsk-StatOil—even though it's in decline—still pays protection money to the empire. The corporations call it a tax but it's really a bribe. It allows them immunity from imperial meddling," Miriam explained. "I told the patrolmen one of my geo-magnetometer picked up an anomaly—typical of re-entry—but mentioned nothing else. They bought it."

Both took turns at the helm. By morning, the northern shores of the Sea of Marmara appeared

through the miasma. A halogen necklace flickered through layers of sea-gas, Constantinople's ceaseless refurbishing factories working through the night. Beyond the industrial exurbs, closer to the city, slum districts dappled the hillside. Some called Nova Byzantium's capital the world's largest refugee camp, but authorities were quick to disclose that the "dormios" were periodically purged of non-citizens. The authenticity of the claims was doubted by its over-taxed citizens.

Once known as "the Paris of the East," Constantinople had shed such sister-city monikers. With Paris a depopulated slagheap sifted through by warring Gaulic clans, such nicknames were ironic. "The Tented City" was more appropriate, a moniker embraced by the senate and the emperor himself. It evoked notions of bygone epochs when the Ottoman sultans lived lives of luxury beneath silk pavilions; the truth was less opulent, however.

Constantinople, unlike most cities on the Black Sea, was susceptible to episodic dead zones from the Bosphorus' briny bacterial blooms. The senate decided long ago to seal the city. Sooty tarpaulins draped Constantinople's taller buildings, from the Hagia Sophia in the Sultanhamet to the bleak skyscrapers of Maslak. The inner metropolis was a cocooned cityscape, embedded in the egg skein of some mammoth spider. The end result was a sprawling, climate-controlled labyrinth, the streets tinged with ancient odors no longer cleansed by rain. Outside the hermetic walls, the underclass was relegated to lives of hooded drudgery.

Miriam pulled down the mainsail and started the cat's electrical motor. They rounded the old

city's hilly peninsula and cruised into The Golden Horn. The inlet was now a silted estuary of waterweeds, the open water ingress of eras past stagnant except for a few dredged canals. Up the main channel, the catamaran skirted past jellyfish seiners and clunky salvage barges. On the western shore, tucked against the city's minaret spine, Miriam pulled up to a busy quay and docked.

"I wasn't expecting you for a few months," Miriam admitted, tying off a bowline to a rusted cleat. "In the meantime, we'll have to tuck your payload away and out of sight."

"When's the flight?" Uri asked.

"I haven't arranged it yet. Hopefully in a few weeks if we're lucky. No one was expecting your little stunt," she admonished.

In Miriam's eyes, Uri's bravado was disdainful and irresponsible. Archivists were creatures of survival and instinctive caution. To taunt the status quo was brash and ego—a cowboy move—rich with jinx. She'd little patience for it.

"Where're we going with these?" Uri said, shouldering the cumbersome duffel and stepping onto the dock.

"I have connections. I know a restorer who works in one of the Basilica Cisterns. We'll stash them there for now."

"What about your flat? No offense, but I don't know this restorer."

Miriam had offered to put Uri up in an adjoining loft she'd converted into a lab. The invite was a request by Sayyid. Estranged from the city's cosmopolitan pleasures, the sheikh didn't trust Uri to the pull of the city's debauchery, relying on Miriam to keep him focused on the mission. Although offended by the slight, Uri didn't mind

the insinuation. A month spent in the Beyoglu's buggy pensions was a headache to be avoided.

She tied off the mooring line and looked at him, liquid brown eyes narrowed. "You want to stash two megaton-caliber nuclear weapons in my home?"

He shrugged.

"You really are a crazy fool."

"It was just a thought."

Miriam locked the catamaran's hatches and led him through the crowds to the old city's pressurized gate. A whoosh of spice and incense overwhelmed him; it'd been years since he'd walked Nova Byzantium's pulsing arteries.

Like the old city's stratified architecture, the narrow streets bustled with the post-modernity of technology: autos, haute couture, body-implants, and consoles. Even eyewear ran the gambit of mixed cultures, from wavelength-shifting Ferragamos to pseudo-Victorian monocles. Fashion was transitory and sentimental, an embrace of a Pre-Shock past never to reemerge. Uri preferred the sleek sterility of the caliphate's orbital kingdom or the rusted skeletons of abandoned cities to Constantinople's self-indulgent bohemia.

Generations had been filled with a collective denial. Constantinople's citizens refused to acknowledge that Nova Byzantium's greatness had long since faded. Uri loathed the maudlin segues of the past. Life, civilization, humanity: it all needed a clean break, a sea change. His urge to burn away the clutter was now almost instinct. Nostalgia was an illness.

Miriam walked ahead of him, her confident pace choreographed as she wove past stalls of console vendors and gray-market hackers. Despite her former life, she was equally at home in the

crowded Byzantine streets, comfortable in its faded grandeur.

The duffel's straps dug into his shoulder as Uri labored to keep up. She'd given him no indication how far the cistern entrance was from the quay, and from her aggravated tone, she cared little about Uri's sweaty plight. Head down, he continued to struggle with the nuclear arsenal, careful not to stumble over the street's uneven tarmac.

Constantinople's mash-up of languages and accents provided Uri a cultural camouflage. Every corner of the empire was represented in shouts and conversations as they walked: Kurdish gossip, Ukrainians haggling, Armenian prayers—all synched to a soundtrack of Turkish Arabesk that pumped from the balconies and storefronts.

Past the Yeni Mosque and through the lower spice bazaar's automated dispensary, Miriam led him deeper into the Sultanhamet's morning throb. Above, the rebuilt Beyezit Tower and its two hundred meters of synchronized marquees, cast an LED aurora through the tenting. A fixed beacon, it was the only landmark in the old city's rabbit warrens.

An exchange of Latin caught Uri's attention. Wary of Constantinople's paramilitaries, his guard was up. Despite the city's cosmopolitan mix, an archivist's anonymity was never guaranteed. Free to roam the Earth's lawlessness, islands of law and order felt airless and vexatious. With the crush of civilization came an adjustment period.

Miriam stopped outside the stone archway of a han, an old merchant courtyard dating from days of the Silk Road, and waited for Uri to catch up. She stared into the gate's cyclopean retinal scanner,

letting its red beam crisscross her iris. They both waited.

"Do you have any local money?" he asked, panting.

"A few notes, why?"

"Then why didn't we rent a pedicab?"

Like a parent, she scolded him with her eyes. Uri, about to mount a defense, capitulated; the argument wasn't worth it. He was going to have to choose his battles.

"Never mind."

The blue doors swung open, pushed by unseen hydraulic arms. They walked into an arcade surrounded by shuddered storehouses. An elderly man, his face dusky and wrinkled, stood near a doorway. He was ethnically Istanbuli and wore a beige tunic underneath a tattered sports jacket, a fez canted atop his head.

"His name is Hafiz. He does not speak Latin," Miriam informed him.

Uri shook his frail hand and nodded.

Behind a collapsible gate, Hafiz led them down a spiral stair into a vast cistern. The water level, far higher than in centuries past, filled the reservoir a few meters from its vaulted arches. They stepped into a flat-bottomed punt and pushed off from a stone landing. With Zliva and Pravo's cumbersome weight rocking the shallow boat, Uri wrestled himself to the center. They floated through a forest of Roman columns, the chamber's dim lighting giving the place a Styx-like ambience. Hafiz pointed out peculiarities of the sunken architectures, but Miriam's apathetic translation left Uri ignorant. He peered into the water at the Corinthian columns wavering beneath

the languid surface. He dipped his hand in and tasted the water, fresh and sweet.

They moored next to a filtering unit. Uri pulled the containers out from the duffel and made sure the vacuum seals were fully engaged. He doubted Miriam had informed Hafiz of their deadly contents. Knowledge of a doomsday device stashed in his cistern would've made him less than accommodating.

"He said you can tie it off here." Miriam pointed to a submersed filtering unit. "Hafiz is the only one who comes down here. It'll be safe for now. The water will cool them if they start to get hot."

Miriam had thought ahead. She was as shrewd as she was aloof. But as a trained geophysicist, the complicated interaction of heavy nuclei was basic science. Uri lowered the warheads into the water and tied the frayed rope to the filter's slurping manifold.

Back at street level, Miriam handed Hafiz a stack of Byzantine shekels and said goodbye. "Hosh cha kaluhn," Uri blurted. The oldster gave him a dumb-deaf grimace, trying but failing to understand his mangled pidgen. Waving goodbye to the stooped Istanbuli, they continued on. He pulled out a cigarillo and lit it, his last.

"If there's time, I'd like to wander the Grand Bazaar—this is my last one," he said, gesturing to the leafy roll. "There's a tobacconist there—at least there was ten years ago."

Miriam again chastised him with her eyes, eyebrows raised. Arms crossed, she looked at her wristwatch then gazed off in thought.

"I won't be long," Uri begged

"All right, archivist," Miriam said, capitulating. "But if I catch you smoking in my flat, you'll be sleeping out on the roof with the crows." Crows, for whatever reason, filled the skies of Constantinople with their black murders, a natural order somehow upended.

"Understood," Uri smiled, encouraged by Miriam's brief flicker of warmth.

They cut through the lush greenhouses of the Bayezid Mosque and into a cat-infested alleyway when Uri's console beeped. He activated the communiqué reader and scrolled to two new messages.

"Sayyid finally get a hold of you?" Miriam quipped.

"It would appear so, however unfortunate."

Archivist U. Vitko, It would seem in your case that the ends justify the means, as you like to say. Congratulations on a successful, yet abbreviated journey. But let this be a warning: Any further undue risk to vital mission hardware or mission objectives will result in full termination of your contract with the caliphate. Best of luck, keep me informed ::-Sheikh Sayyid Al Azraq Hawat #138-NAQ-1B3:: sent via PDP-8 :: encryption clock 1.31 hrs ::

"A backhanded compliment... you arrogant pompous inbred," Uri whispered.

"Are you talking to me?" Miriam snapped.

"No, Sayyid," Uri said, looking up. "He said if I pulled a stunt like that again, I'd no longer be an agent under contract for Al Fadah Madina."

"Don't mention that name in public," Miriam said, pressing her finger to her lips. "Our business with the sheikhdome is not to be discussed outside clandestine channels."

"Understood," Uri sighed.

"Anyway, I happen to agree with Sayyid. You risked the success of this mission with your audacious misadventure. Such foolishness is stupefying."

Miriam was paranoid. Uri doubted the city's spooks had indoctrinated the slinky cats underfoot as spies. As for the other slight-poached and spitted, bones scattered across the Sinai, death was exponentially more likely trekking up from Soqotra than his celestial barnstorm. Calculi Sayyid understood well but was too prideful to admit.

"Point taken." He didn't want to get into another argument; he was more interested in the second communiqué.

Uri, it appears you've kept the Kali procurement for yourself after having partaken. Forbidden by sharia law, we Muslims are not allowed to indulge such hallucinogenic idolatry, so it is taboo in Al' Fadah Madina. As an infidel, I would like to offer you supplemental compensation for additional inquiries into the mask's technological beginnings. All that is required is a summary report, documenting what you find. We are very curious. :: unknown #656-PIL-9W3 :: sent via Excelsior :: encryption clock 0.003 hrs::

The sheikh behind the Kali mask procurement had surfaced at last. The mystery man was willing to make due with a surrogate, afraid to dabble with the taboo directly. Uri had taken the bait. The sheikh had somehow accessed Uri's console routing codes and bypassed Sayyid's anachronistic dispatching processor. It could've been any one of the caliphate's thousand sheikhs, but probably an underling within Sayyid's inner circle. This sort

of double-dealing, Uri had learned, was common among the caliphate's brotherhood.

[NB] CHAPTER NINE

January 2164 C.E.

The ship was a sunken Roman galley, a three-oared trireme, lying upright on the sandy seabed. Sitting like a captain on its cedar throne, Sava overlooked the sulfur-blackened deck from the forecastle. His legs were molded to the decking as if part of the vessel. Somewhere between his knees and ribcage, his body transmogrified from the wood's pulpy cellulous to calcified tissue. A dull phantom ache sapped his mind.

Clumps of aggregate floated above him, bacteria collecting into a thin mist on the wavering halocline. Past the purple strata, towards the surface, undulating blobs pulsed to an electrochemical rhythm. There were millions of them, sealing the abyssal anoxia from the fluvial waters. Dead jellyfish fell from the bloom and collected on the sea bottom; their bodies clumped into heaps of biomass.

One of the dying creatures fell near Sava's feet. Barely alive, its stringy tentacles pulsed to a bizarre swan song. He stared into its gelatinous center as the hypnotic yellow strands danced in the current. Unvoiced cant—a telepathic music—elicited a cross-species empathy; it was trying to speak to him.

"What do you want?"

"We are dying. You are our voice, the mouth of the dead, and it is you who will deliver our requiem."

"I..." He opened his mouth as bubbles escaped through his nose. "I speak for no one."

"Are you not the captain? Do you not speak for your kind?"

"This—" he said, gesturing to the ship, "—is not my warship. I am, if anything, just a passenger."

"You represent the empire. You are their emissary." The limp tentacles constricted around his wooden feet. Frenzied, they dug into the waterlogged cedar like burrowing worms.

"I did not mean to exploit you," Sava said, eyes bulging wide. "I was desperate and I needed the money."

"Then you will be our watchmen, our keeper. And we will be reborn with you."

"I... I don't understand."

"Look at your hand, it's quickening."

Sava looked down. His fingertips were glued to the wooden armrest, miniature nails bonding flesh to the wood. He couldn't tear away. Like his legs, the throne was merging with him. He looked up at the jellyfish clouds. They were all dying now, a gelatinous precipitate raining down by the thousands. He felt the slimy mesoglea brush past him.

"I'm a demon, aren't I?"

The pain intensified. He tore at his moorings, leveraging himself with his good hand. Unable to break free, he slumped. He was one with the throne, a statue forever entombed.

"No, not a demon. Demons are only blessed by the damned."

The voice faded into watery silence. The deck was full of milky corpses. Like seeds, a garden of polyps sprung up from the wreck, their small flagella reaching towards the magenta light above.

#

Sava sprang from his bed and grabbed his left calf with both hands to knead the muscle spasm. It happened more often lately: once a week, sometimes twice. The others reported carpal tunnel and numbness below the elbow, but Sava was the only one complaining of a "charley horse." A few weeks on, the Morosov treatment's side effects continued to plague the men.

He straightened his leg, locked the knee, and touched his toes to relieve the cramp. As the pain retreated, he flipped on the bunk light and lit a cigarette. It was four in the morning and almost time for his watch. He put on his gear, rinsed his face in the shallow aluminum sink, and grabbed his rifle.

The Crown of Thorns, or "the Crown" as the fifteen Alkonost called it, was a bleak post, nothing short of a living tomb. A common mess joined the mercenaries' billets interconnected by tall narrow hallways. A spiral staircase led to the Crown's operations center, a monitoring station adjoined to a meeting room filled with wobbly office loungers around a metal table. Anemic light from outside leaked in through narrow slit windows. Despite its northern latitude, the Crown was curiously never cold; ambient warmth seeped through its smooth dark concrete, possibly geothermal, no one was sure.

"Another day of absurdity," Sava said, slumping into the cracked vinyl of a swivel chair.

"I don't know, Sava. The lizards on this rock can take you apart quicker than a cranked-up Ural. Ever vigilant," Mach said, surfing the wall of infrared and optical monitors.

"The coffee's not bad." Sava sipped from a thermos canteen.

"Selassie's finest; straight from the Horn. A girl working in contracts owed me a favor, so I upped our logistics rider."

Sava's eyes perked. "Tatiana or Ludmilla?"

"Neither, her name's Oksana. She's knows a cousin of mine, lives in the old Jewish quarter... virtually family."

"Family didn't stop your father from marrying your mother," Sava laughed.

"Never make fun of my mother," Mach smirked, pulling out his handgun and waving at Sava.

"But there's just so much to make fun of," Sava grinned, gesturing with his hands held wide. "What's your maty up to these days, 140 kilos?"

"That's it," Mach said, cocking the brushed steel of 9mm semi-automatic. "You die."

"But who will be around to beat you at chess and smoke your cigarettes?" Sava laughed, smashing out his butt. "It won't be Yakiv; that kid's an idiot."

"So what kind of favor did this Oksana do for you?"

"I find it odd you can make jokes about chess, after Turkmenbashi." Mach turned serious.

"That was ugly, wasn't it," Sava waxed nostalgic.

"What's this?" Mach pointed at one of monitor screen and flipped it to long-wave infrared.

Sava squinted at the ghosted blur on the security monitor. Mach's finger tracked a white blob as it scrambled across the black cold of a jagged boulder field. It wasn't a bird, and the Jan Mayen's stagnant seas were too rich with sulfides for any wayward seal; it had to be a man.

"It's not responding to friend-or-foe interrogate and it's too dark for visual," Mach

said, fingering the auto-cannon arming switch. "Shall I?"

"Hold tight, I'm heading out to investigate," Sava said, pulling out his enrichment hood. "Get on the intercom, see if anyone's missing. I'll radio back."

The dead zone was receding, leaving behind a foggy inversion layer. Crouching, Sava looked through his Vepr sight, the lowlight enhanced to penetrate the aerosols. The setting sun cast a pall over the sweating sea rock, movement scrambled by waddling auks incubating their thin-shelled eggs.

"All's clear so far," Sava radioed. "I'm about a klick northeast of the Crown." Sava waved.

"I see you," Mach radioed back.

He headed inland, up the guano-streaked cliffs, across the muskeg toward a claw of basalt. He launched a parachute flare to have a look. Under the potassium glow slumped a lethargic man wearing mud-caked trousers and nothing else. His hair was high and tight, face cleanly shaven: Alkonost.

"Yakiv, you stupid bastard! What the hell are you doing out here?"

The recruit was delirious, mumbling and drooling, his eyes dilated and twitchy. He was hypoxic and in the initial stages of pulmonary edema. Sava needed to get him to the med station. He lifted Yakiv to his feet and wrapped his frigid arm around his shoulder to support him.

"Mach, tell the doc to get a bay set up, we'll need oxygen and IV fluids. It's Yakiv. He's out of his mind," Sava radioed, dragging the private down the scree slopes.

The Crown's auto-cannons exploded in a lightning crack of fusillade. Sava dropped Yakiv and dove

into the hollow of an upturned clod. The radio was inundated with the popping hiss of outgoing autocannon rounds. Fifty-millimeter shells streaked the gloom with tracer fire. A nearby ridge plumed with black smoke, the explosions' dust fires reflected in the slurry of a nearby tidal lagoon.

"Mach, hold fire!"

Static.

Sava waited. Yakiv's eyes were glazed, lips purple with oxygen deprivation. If the barrage didn't cease soon, the mercenary would be brain dead. Sava stayed low and waited. The bursts from the gun emplacements grew sporadic with the passing minutes, until at last, the redoubt's gunmetal faded to shadow.

"Mach! Goddamn it!"

"Sorry, boss," Mach radioed back, the interfering sputter dissipating. "Is your friend-or-foe beacon active?"

Sava checked his forearm console and saw the pulsing icon of a green shield. "IFF is on. What's the system locked on to?"

Mach groaned in frustration. "I released the arming switch when you found Yakiv, then the tracker picked up another target almost instantly. Automated, I couldn't stop it. I'll explain when you get back."

"Send some guys out here, I need help bringing Yakiv in. We've got to get him on oxygen, stat."

#

Under the fluorescent lights of the triage bay, the squad's medic wrapped Yakiv in the foil of a thermal blanket and fitted an oxygen mask over his face. An amyl nitrite mixture was bled into the oxygen to offset the mild sulfide poisoning.

Despite his physical state, he was lucid and able to talk.

"Yakiv!" Sava snapped his fingers in front of the mercenary's nose. "Can you hear me?"

Yakiv nodded weakly.

"What the hell were you doing out there without a hood and filter? Who were you after?"

"No one, lieutenant," Yakiv slurred. "This past week... I've been sleepwalking. Cleaning my weapon, walking the inner cordon aimless, showering until I'm pruned... But the strange thing is..." the mercenary trailed off.

"Yes?"

"The strange thing is..." Yakiv looked into Sava's eyes. "I'm not a sleepwalker, never have been. Could it be the treatment?"

Sava shook his head. "Don't know, but we've all been suffering nocturnal anomalies lately. Haven't we, Mach?"

Mach shrugged.

"Did you see anyone else out there?" Sava asked.

Eyes darting, Yakiv pondered as Sava waited impatiently. He repeated the question again. "I... I... I thought I saw someone, a ghost, like a man, but different... not sure."

"He's out of it. Take him away."

The medic and another recruit lifted Yakiv's stretcher and carried him off to sickbay. Sava set his Vepr down and sat next to Mach at the monitoring station. Pulling the data cartridge from the Crown's northeastern cameras, Mach scanned the previous hour's footage.

"When you found Yakiv, I armed the auto-cannons IFF. I thought it might've been a set-up or an ambush," Mach explained, tracing Sava's outline on replay. "Ridiculous, considering the desolation of

this inhospitable atoll, but paranoia got the best of me, so I took precautions."

"The trackers found something else, didn't they?" Sava asked, lighting a cigarette. "Yakiv's ghost?"

"See," Mach pointed at the black outline of Jan Mayen's volcanic spine. "There's something running along the crest of the ridge, just in range. Something large. The system's been dialed back to filter out indigenous critters: birds, iguanas, rats... this was bigger."

"Did we hit it?"

"Not sure. Beside some brush burn from the incendiaries, the infrared's picked up nothing." Mach replayed the video, outgoing drumfire streaking the screen. In between the muzzle flash, Sava spotted a jittery flyspeck traced by an orange targeting triangle. It could've been anything.

"Who else could be on this island?"

"Why so sure it's a who, maybe it's an it?" Mach speculated.

"You and I've been at this long enough to know when we're being stalked. Someone's probing our defenses. It looks like our hardened hugger-mugger talents might be needed on this rock after all."

Sava remembered the downed Mi-26 out on the runway. Its escapee could be wandering the Beerenberg's yellowed escarpment, cranky and starving, looking for revenge. Jan Mayen brimmed with skullduggery; Sava felt it. They were ignorant pawns in someone's covert machinations.

"What do you think we're supposed to be defending?" Mach asked, taking a swig from his Kevlar canteen. "You know... down in the vault?"

"Why don't we take a look?"

"Good idea."

The vault's portal mimicked an ancient design. The faceted door was a woven stainless alloy, heavy and impossible to drill. A knife tap revealed no acoustic depth. Solid as quarry marble, the builders of the portico must have intended for it to last for millennia.

Concentric dials, unmarked and featureless, functioned as the door's sole locking mechanism. Sava spun the device and felt the supple clicks of its well-oiled spindle and drive cam. Alkonost's data logs showed no record of the cryptic combination. Blindly guessing, the number of permutations needed to produce the correct combination—even if it was hooked to a supercomputer with a robotic spinner—would exhaust the geological age of the Post-Holocene.

"Not in our lifetimes," Sava said, idly pounding on the door's metal slab. "Whatever's inside here might as well be on the Moon."

"Maybe it's all for show, an illusion, a prop."

A closet-sized pit beneath a floor hatch worked as the vault's antechamber, just large enough for two people to shift awkwardly. The cramped space was engineered to hinder the deployment of hydraulic safe-cracking gear. Sava put his ear to the vault and felt warmth against his cheek. He heard a faint electrical buzz indiscernible from the drone of the Crown's filtering systems.

"It's so tight, air molecules couldn't eek out, let alone killer germs," Mach said, tracing the door seal with his fingertips. "That Morosov treatment..." he paused. "What the hell was it supposed to protect us against, anyway?"

"Don't know," Sava shrugged. "Maybe they've trapped some cyclopean sea god in here and built

this sarcophagus around it," he joked. "Now it's escaped and running amok."

"If only," grinned Mach. "You know the Crown's power comes from inside, probably a thermo-voltaic generator tapped into a geothermal well. Jan Mayen's a tectonic hotspot. There's a manifold just under operations, under the floor grating. The conduit runs through the vault's core, right through here," he said, slapping the metal.

"Is there anyway to get into it from above?"

"Not physically. But we could cobble together a fiber endoscope and worm it along the power cables."

"Might be interesting to have a peek," Sava said. "One has to wonder, if this vault's so watertight and impossible to open, why did they bother hiring us?"

Mach raised his eyebrows. "Good question."

Sifting through company mission reports bore little results. The only detail of the vault's contents were small sidebars noting that "Cargo A-2," weighing forty kilos, was received December 2 and introduced into "Chamber C-12" on January 8. In the past five years, this routine had been completed piecemeal with the last of the cargo delivered a month prior to the team's arrival.

"Someone in Alkonost knows what's in here."

"Got their long-wave encryption key? I'll dial them up," Sava joked. "I'm sure they'd be more than eager to divulge."

Disseminating classified information would get an Alkonost mercenary imprisoned, exiled, or executed. Transnistria's Smirnov Legal Code was strict, prosecuting such transgressions as highest treason. Alkonost was Tiraspol's pride, the fountainhead of its treasure. If rumor spread that

the mercenary company was nothing more than thieves—corruptible and untrustworthy—Nova Byzantium would pull their contracts. Denied revenue, the Free State of Transnistria would wither.

“For now, it all pays the same, eh?” Sava said.

Mach pulled out his flask and waved the vodka under Sava’s nose. He took a sip then handed it back to Mach, his jaw clenched with fiery alcohol.

“A game of chess?”

Sava nodded.

[NB] CHAPTER TEN
October 2163 C.E.

Uri had hydrated and donned the strange mask again...

He found himself on the outskirts of Baku: he'd been there before, but as a man, not as a woman. For a woman, it could be a far crueler place...

A mob pressed in around him... no, her, a young woman. Above the throng, the omnipresent oil derricks jumbled with Baku's blackened tenements. A knock to the head caused her to fall. Dribbling kicks scooted her along through the oily mud as she tried to stand. A hand with sharp fingernails grabbed her clothing, ripping. She screamed, defiant and shrill.

Shredded clothing dangled from her body like streamers. The mob reached in and snatched away the last shreds until she was completely naked. A downward glance: this was a girl's body, maybe fifteen. Her partially developed breasts were small against her slight ribcage, hips still narrow; more of a child than a woman. A piece of metal sailed in and hit her, slicing her scalp and causing it to bleed. The mob pushed and shoved, the girl's feet barely touching the road as they carried her along. The mad parade pushed on, the mass reeling with vicious energy.

"Witch!"

Uri's grasp of Azeri was good enough to understand their chants. Gaining focus, his mind re-oriented. Devoid of reason, superstitious people easily reverted to manias regardless of continent or century. In dark times, female

sexuality, like booze or a drug, was a powerful and misunderstood intoxicant to the primitive mind, a volatile force to be feared.

Whatever this girl's crime, sleeping with a teenage lover, spurning the advances of a village elder... it had raised the ire of the people in this Baku backwater. Now they were going to exorcise the demon, a public shaming followed by the ultimate punishment.

Brine flies swarmed, hatched from petroleum pools on the Caspian's salty shores. They were everywhere, in every breath. Oil fires ringed the city's peninsula, the carbon smoke an attempt to ward off the insect plague.

The girl was asthmatic. Every wheezy breath of particulate-heavy air was a struggle as she sobbed. They cinched a rope around her neck as the ringleaders yanked her, stumbling and tripping, down the rutted road.

"Help me!" Her pleas were muted by the mob's rage.

The citizens of Baku continued to taunt. The cruelty was astonishing, bloodlust whipped into an insane fury. Uri's calloused emotions were raw.

Beyond the crowd was a hill dotted with derricks like crucifixes atop Golgotha. Torches sailed in, the flames singeing her hair as they hit her shoulders. The crowd was trying to burn her. Another yank of the rope and she fell flat as the mob dragged her the last hundred meters.

"Kill the witch! Burn her!"

Filthy hands stood her to face the crowd as she tried to cover her nakedness with shaky hands. Uri felt the chill of humiliation, waves of it wringing her with shame. Next to a gang of

henchmen stood the agitator. Dressed in black robes, he wore the garb of an orthodox priest.

Nova Byzantium was the confederated capital of the outer provinces, but had no local authority to intervene. Uri was disgusted by the Bakuvian's barbarian nonsense. Baku was "civilized" in name only.

The girl's eyes darted through the crowd, desperate for mercy. Uri focused through her bloodshot view. Through the particulates, he saw the city and its main access road. Far from empty, the avenue was choked with Alkonost's armored vehicles as Hind gunships circled the Baku skyline. The mechanized column was close. Uri was stupefied; none of the mercenaries had bothered to stop the attack.

Baku was the staging point for Alkonost's Operation Alexander, a massive amphibious assault on the Caspian's eastern shore over two hundred kilometers away. A warlord in Turkmenbashi had made an alliance with Constantinople, and they'd contracted Tiraspol to purge the Turkmen city of the tyrant's enemies.

Off in the distance, Uri was smoking a cigar, napping on an APC maybe, waiting for mission orders, and bored. Through the girl, he felt his doppelganger like a ghost. The burnt salt, the sting of petroleum, watery rust, Baku's reek was inimitable. He had shrugged off the Dagestan stoning as coincidence, but this was a conspiracy. Held hostage by the horror, Uri awaited for the conclusion.

Groping hands threw the girl against the A-frame of a pumpjack. Thin cables, torn from the derelict rig, were wound tightly around her ankles and wrists. The barbed frays sliced through soft

flesh, the pain acute. Below, toppled barrels spilled crude into a shallow moat. A grinning man in overalls stood nearby, eagerly stroking the flint of a naphtha lighter with his thumb.

Labored breaths lapsed into suffocating gasps. Uri hoped the girl would simply pass out, fade away, avoid the fiery excruciation, but her tormentors were too efficient; they were practiced hands at burning the community's "unclean."

The priest approached, eyes ablaze under the brim of his petrol-stained klobuk. He hollered an indignant screed. In between breaths of hate-filled baritone, Uri heard the girl whisper an inaudible prayer.

With a nod from the holy man, the lighter dropped to the ground.

Uri felt the flash of pain; the shock was a small death in itself. Smoke plumed from her feet, sealing her eyes, nose, and mouth with choking soot. She exploded in a fit of strangling coughs. The burn was conceivable at first: the cauterizing of a blowtorch, the sear of a stove element, radiator steam... but then it mutated into the unimaginable. Blind and asphyxiated, she started to lose her mind.

Uri was desperate to unchain himself from the dying girl; every immolated second was a universe of pain. With her skin gone, he felt nothing but the dull roast of dying organs. Like a singed caterpillar, the girl's body convulsed and contracted. And with the heat, Uri felt her cerebellum hiss and pop, veins bursting inside gray matter. The flames consumed her.

The mask released him.

It fell to the floor, shriveling limp as it crawled away. The adrenalin rush he remembered

from Soqotra was gone, no euphoria or endorphin high this time. In its place was nausea and disgust. Uri took a swig of water then lit his cigarillo.

Miriam was still out on an errand.

He never saw the girl but looking through her eyes, he understood her beauty. Uri could only wonder who she was. She must have had a name; everyone had a name. Did her parents mourn her, or were they part of the mob? Was there a body left to bury? Uri dabbed out his cigarillo and covered his face with sweaty hands. Snot, vomit, and saliva poured down his chin as he wept.

The angst, just one fully loaded APC would have made quick work of the mob, he brooded.

Sobbed out, he stood and wiped his nose with a shirt cuff. The floor was a mess. He'd knocked over the tea bowl, the brown liquid spilt over the loft's Persian carpet mixing with a puddle of vomit. The mask had finished its desiccation, wrung free of its fluid. The tea broth tasted earthy like composted leaves. What purpose it served—beyond the mask's hydraulics—wasn't obvious, some chemical cue, a catalyst or a polymer kernel.

Uri reclined on a leather bench and relit his cigarillo when Miriam walked in. Infuriated, she threw her satchel to the floor.

"That's it! I warned you, no smoking in my office! You will not stay here anymore," she roared.

Lacking the will for protest, Uri tossed the butt into the water decanter. Miriam's eyes gravitated to the Kali mask, vomit and spilt tea scattered over the tessellated carpet.

"Were you doing drugs in my flat? Are you sick? Is that what all this is?" she said, lips snarled in disgust.

Uri shook his head.

"Before I shoot you, explain yourself."

"This—" Uri picked the mask up from the floor. "—Is a side job for Al Fadah Madina. The contract is with some sheikh who wants to remain anonymous... for obvious reasons."

Miriam regained her poise and crept closer, eyeing the mask's menacing red stare. Curious, she reached out to touch one of its slick arms but stopped. "What is this monstrosity?"

"It's a mask. You put it on." He held it up to Miriam's face. She pulled back, her large eyes wary. "It broadcasts experiences into your mind."

"There is no such thing."

"I used to think so, but this thing proved me wrong."

"What kind of experiences?"

"Executions, death, awful stuff. This last one... I can't even begin to describe it." He motioned to the spot on the floor. "I'll clean all this up. I apologize. It just got the best of me."

Miriam's temper cooled as quickly as it had flashed. As a scientist, she was capable of forgiving Uri his macabre research, however visceral and messy. The matter of Uri's cigarillo had yet to be resolved, however.

Uri picked up the mask's box and pointed out the symbols on it to Miriam. "It has some association with Kali, the Hindu goddess of annihilation. And I figure the Thuggees employed this device in their rituals. I don't know if they used it on their victims or on themselves, probably both." Uri set the mask into the box's felted inset and

counted the remaining tea bars: thirty-four, assorted into twelve different flavors.

"So, you know what it does now. You can report back to the sheikhs, and then what? You get paid?" Miriam asked, sitting down in her desk's roller-lounge.

Uri shrugged. "I'm not sure, but I am certain they're going to want to know who made it, and how it works." Uri was far more curious than the sheikhs. The contract was just an added bonus. "It's adapted Morosov technology, I think, similar to something I saw years before. But that technology was clumsier, outdated mind-reading gear, just pixilated fragments of memory and digital sound. The mask is perfection, the experiences pure."

Miriam noticed his puffy eyes and ruddy cheeks but said nothing. They sat in silence. Outside, Constantinople's bustle filled the awkward lull. Miriam brought Uri a towel and a bucket of hot water from her adjoining flat. He thanked her and cleaned up the congealed sick, scrubbing the Persian camel hair with a brush and soap.

Miriam's loft hinted at a more complicated woman than her abrasive personality revealed. The study walls were lined with shelves of yellowing books, procured in the old city's book bazaars. They were antiques of course. Printed books were long extinct. Most were tattered texts on geology and meteorology, but a few hinted at another side of Miriam: One Thousand and One Arabian Nights, The Tale of Genjii, The Complete Works of Shakespeare, The Grasshopper Lies Heavy, Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice.

Terminals and chemical analyzers filled the rest of the loft, some functioning, others in various

states of repair. Miriam was a busy girl. Norsk-Statoil, in its frantic search for viable oil fields, funded the majority of her geological work, while Al Fadah Madina quietly paid for the rest. Uri appreciated the leather furniture and the smell of old wood and paper. With the narrow streets and hidden shops of the Beyoglu just downstairs, the overall ambiance hinted at a lost utopia.

"Are you comfortable sleeping on the floor?"

"It's fine. Very restful." It was the truth. Despite the thin carpet and hardwood underneath, he'd slept like the dead, dreamless and seamless.

"I was going to make some tea," she offered.

"I'd like that."

She left through the dormer hallway that connected her study to the rest of the flat. Uri was about to shut the mask's case when he noticed the glint of the tea bar's colored foil. He picked up one of the small blocks and inspected the Sanskrit—or maybe Hindi—inscription. Each bar had its own distinct calligraphy. A name, a flavor?

Miriam returned and poured Uri a cup of fragrant Riza. He noticed intricate scarring on the inside of her forearm, Farsi script from a branding iron. He tried not to look. She caught his wandering eye and pulled down her sleeve. He'd seen those scars before on the chattel of slavers.

"Do you have access to Nova Byzantium's data hubs?" he asked, changing the subject.

"Yes, a limited account. I have a level two access."

"And Rosetta capability?"

"What do you need to translate, archivist?"

"Uri, please."

Miriam continued the formality, refusing to call him by his name.

"Sanskrit, Hindi, I'm not exactly sure."

"Sanskrit? *Lingua morta*. The hubs can only cipher Byzantine and Arabic." "Byzantine" was the catchall for the imperial languages: Latin, Turkish, Ukrainian, Caucasian. Pockets of literacy in other languages still existed, but none Nova Byzantium deemed worthy.

"Hafiz has a Punjabi friend who knows Hindi. He met him after he helped restore a Sikh temple near the Horn," Miriam said, sipping her tea. "Maybe he can translate."

#

Uri left the mask at the flat, not wanting to draw attention. After a round of shisha and chai, Miriam introduced him to the temple's bearded guru and handed the wrappings from the two tea bars he had used and ten of the other bars. His name was Chamfra, a shirtless little man with a towering blue turban and a quiet voice.

Miriam translated the holy man's utterances. Uri scribbled down the messages and soon realized each bar was labeled with a name, location, and date, but nothing more. Thanking the guru with a few shekels, they left his tiny temple and headed for one of the Beyoglu's black markets. Fortunately the Russian refugees running the weapons bazaar spoke fluent Ukrainian, saving Miriam from playing the annoyed interpreter. It was a good thing, considering. The Russian's bartering cant was subtle and manipulative, a hypnotic skill acquired from Romany street swindlers. Uri was familiar with their tricks.

After a sweaty hour of haggling, he'd got what he wanted: a Zigana 9mm pistol with extra clips, a

Persian Khyber rifle 7.62mm bullpup with bipod and scope, and a specialty bayonet thrown in to seal the deal. The knife was uniquely Caucasian, a Grozny beheading blade. Tucked inside its serrated edge were cyanide ducts joined to a reservoir in the handle. A strangely humane weapon, the poisoned blade was intended to deliver a quick death, saving the victim a torturous throat cutting.

Concealing the arsenal in a rolled carpet, Uri followed Miriam through the crowded streets back to her flat. He laid the firearms out on the loft's rug and broke them down, checking the bore, bolt, and breach of each. His choice of rifle did not meet with Miriam's approval, however; the Turkish MKEK would've been a better choice it seemed, less prone to jamming. Miriam was adept had concealing her emotions, but her opinions were a different matter.

"A successful outing, no?"

"I would've rather paid those fences half the ingots, but these are better than Al Fadah Madinah's pop guns," Uri said, parsing out the ammo packs into clip-sized piles.

"What about the Sanskrit? Our whole reason for visiting Galata and Chamfra?"

"Not right now, maybe later."

"Why not now?"

"To be honest," he paused to look Miriam in the eye. "I'm a bit gutless."

"Gutless, why?"

"The two I've already tried... I was there for the executions, but not like you think. I was actually there." He held up the foiled bar. "I'm personally mixed up in this Thuggee artifact—its not just dredging up my past; I know that now. The morbid

curiosity's addictive; the more you relive it, the more you think you're going to grasp it."

"I don't understand."

"I think you do," he said, nodding at her arm.

She turned away.

"The experience before," he continued. "A stoning in Dagestan, I saw myself through the eyes of a child. A platoon of Alkonost mercenaries—myself included—were stationed there. I remembered the spectacle outside the boy's eyes. We didn't know what was happening at first, so we crept through the crowd to watch."

"And what about this last experience?"

"I was in the vicinity with Alkonost at the time, but don't remember the lynching. I know the place, the oil slums of northern Baku. Alkonost tanks and helicopters were circling. Our contract had just come through from Tiraspol, the invasion of the Turkmen Balkans, Turkmenbashi; we were getting ready," Uri looked over the translation notes.

"Let me see," Miriam said, snatching away the notepad. "I spent my afternoon running your errands with you. I'm curious now; I want to take a look."

She sat down at one of her terminals and accessed a holographic orbital map. "This is a hijacked feed from Al Fadah Madina. Nova Byzantium's imperial maps are outdated."

"Start with this one." He read the coordinates and the date, scribbling a crude map of his own while glancing at the screen. She pointed to the eastern Caucasus. "That's it, Tindi in Dagestan." A feeling of relief, it wasn't a hallucination. The execution was preprogrammed, but why the

Alkonost connection? "Try this one, two years prior." He read the longitude and latitude aloud.

She panned the map's contours with a digitized crosshair. "Azerbaijan Province."

"That's it."

"Who was it?"

"You mean who was executed?"

"Yes, who died?" Miriam asked, exasperated.

"Do you really want to know?"

She nodded impatiently.

"It was a witch burning, a young girl."

Her dark eyes widened in horror. She turned back to the terminal and continued to pinpoint locations.

Uri pulled up a chair and drew a topological map of the twelve tea flavors with arrows connecting the timeline. He thought for a moment, trying to link the abstract data to memory fragments. Most were outliers, places he knew of but had never visited. Regardless, the locations ghosted Alkonost's Caspian campaign, an uncanny coincidence.

"Here's another one from Dagestan, but near the Caspian... Three here from the New Stalingrad siege... Grozny..." He glanced at the beheading blade on the carpet. "I can only imagine what that one's about." Of the remaining tea bars, one stood out, Turkmenbashi. As vivid as if it was yesterday, the invasion had resulted in a miserable quagmire. He remembered the place with dread, its horror a turning point. He looked at the gilded bar and shuddered.

"Which one?" Miriam asked.

Uri stroked the bar's shiny gold between his thumb and forefinger. "This... I was here for this one, after Baku-Turkmenbashi, Operation Alexander,

a disaster if there ever was one." Uri shook his head. "Someone in Alkonost was collecting these horrors along the way, probably for a commission, a side job."

"Do you know who?"

He shook his head. "I've a few likely suspects, but I can't confirm anything. It's all circumstantial."

"Who would want to relive an execution?"

"There's a market for it, obviously. Someone was willing to pay. This one just happened to be custom-built for the Thuggees. There're probably others, designed for other sinister reasons."

"And you think Morosov's involved?"

"I can't prove it, but they're my best guess. Or it could be someone selling their technology on the gray market."

"I need to travel to Maslak the day after tomorrow to visit with Norsk-Statoil and try to arrange our flight to Jan Mayen. Morosov maintains a research building in the district. Maybe you can try to get some answers."

"Maybe."

#

Somewhere past the Beyoglu suburbs, halfway to the Maslak business district, the tramway broke down. Public transportation was always a gamble, Miriam had warned. The metro authority had difficulties supplying replacement dynamos for the EU built motors. The factories that built them were no more, and engineers could only reweld so often before the metal turned to slag.

An advisory was issued. Oxygen levels were barely in the "acceptable" zone, and Miriam and Uri were outside the tents. Unbothered, they doubled back on the sunken tracks to the closest

station and walked the remaining few kilometers. Panting, they navigated overgrown neighborhoods where slum dwellers eked out lives in the exposed ruin. They cut through an overgrown golf course to avoid the worst of it, the links now a menagerie of reptiles and birds. Rich and lush, the ferns and stumpy palms lent the place a Triassic quality.

They hopped up to the elevated highway and walked the shoulder into Maslak's central downtown through the midday rush. The road was clogged with lorries and car traffic queuing to pass through the air seal. Uri felt uncomfortable and out of place in the district's tented nest of skyscrapers and businessmen. Constantinople was a city fueled exclusively on borrowed time.

"This place..." Uri said, shouldering past the suited crowds.

"What about it?" Miriam said.

"Nostalgic antiques. Who're are they fooling?"

"This is 'progress,' archivist." Miriam winked. "At least the way Nova Byzantium sees it. 'The last of the world's corporations trying to move the empire's citizens forward,' " Miriam quoted some oft-repeated maxim.

"These kind of people were responsible for the Post-Industrial Shock. Like the snake Ouroboros, they consumed themselves and ruined it," Uri ranted.

"You worked for Alkonost. They're a corporation."

"I did, but not any more. I've moved on."

She looked at him but said nothing.

They continued into the central plaza, a massive geodesic dome of fabric and tubular struts. Surrounding the artificially blue fountain stood

porticos of office towers. Though impressive, the polished sheen was mere facade. Uri noticed its age. Silicon epoxy bulged from marble cracks, granite panels filled with crumbling stucco. The sagging superstructure compacted the windows, spider-web fractures dulling the smoky panes. A few buildings were cocooned in scaffold, armies of workers restoring the ephemeral architecture in futility.

"Morosov is over there, just a street down," Miriam pointed out. "I need to talk to my contacts here," she said, thumbing at a nearby tower, black and ominous. "Tag my console when you're done. Don't get into trouble. If you do, don't tell me about it, and I don't know you. Understand?"

Uri nodded.

They parted ways. Dressed in a simple button-up, cotton trousers, and a duster, Uri didn't look the part of the executive sophisticate, but he didn't look like a barbarian either. Subtleties of formality left Uri uneasy. Regardless, people of all shades were apt to respond to the same toolkit of stimulus and response, motivated by self-interest.

He entered the sterile lobby of Morosov Labs Incorporated, taking in the polished floors, rows of unoccupied loungers, and the scent of citrus cleaner. The place was empty except for a thin receptionist sitting behind a C-shaped desk, mousy locks slipping out from a loose headscarf. Art, strange and ill-placed, hung from the cathedral ceilings. Organic sculptures sporting corpuscular flagella, fractal masses of engineered microbiology. The piece was an abstract display meant to mimic Morosov's core technology, but the effect was lost on Uri.

"Hello," he said, removing his sunglasses. "I'm a liaison from Alkonost, Lieutenant Uri Vitko. I have an appointment with a representative from Neurological Interface, one of the chief engineers." Since Alkonost military was forbidden from Nova Byzantium proper, representatives of Tiraspol commonly wore plainclothes on travel.

"Your ARIN number please?" The receptionist barely looked up.

"ARIN number, right," he paused to remember. "It's 2112-313-1100, I believe."

She keyed in the number then shook her head. "Sorry, you're not coming up on the access list."

"Damn, and I'm late," he said, gesturing to the clock on the wall.

"If there's a contact name... maybe we can work it that way."

He was getting nowhere. He didn't have a name and couldn't make up one. Reaching into his coat pocket, he pulled out his console and mimed scrolling through a contact list. Shaking his head, he stopped to think.

"They sent me down here last minute, so..." he stalled.

The receptionist said nothing, eyes drifting back to her terminal. Moments later, an elevator doors opened, a tall thin man stepped out and walked past them towards the door.

"Have a good day, Mr. Popov," the girl said, smitten.

The man turned back and waved on they way through the automatic doors. Uri watched him walk out into the plaza. Narrow shoulders, wiry and preoccupied, Uri recognized him, years ago back from the Bicz brig, the I-and-I's mind reading

demonstration. Popov had grayed, but Uri was sure it was him.

"I think that's who I'm supposed to meet."

"Mr. Sergei Popov?"

Uri nodded.

"He'll be back tonight. He tends to work late."

"Thank you," Uri turned to leave. "Thank you very much. I'll catch him then."

[NB] CHAPTER ELEVEN

July 2156 C.E.

The park was quiet, just a few bird chirps carried by the wind. He came here to relax and have a smoke between language classes and chess games at the veteran's local. He enjoyed chess and its structure. Enemies were black or white, no ambiguous shades of gray. The academic miniaturized battles avoided the messiness of actual warfare, the carnage reduced to sour grapes. His rating was rising in Tiraspol's intramurals, and he'd managed a few stalemates against the local masters. Chess was therapy, a respite from inner chatter.

Cigarillos were impossible to get in Tiraspol, so Uri resorted to his old cherry wood pipe. It was less mercenary, more civilized, and suitable for the interim. His furlough was scheduled for five months, but it had stretched a month longer, some problem with the imperial contract. After Moldova, he was hungry for the next operation; downtime was hard time. Uri grabbed his satchel and put away his Latin text. Checking his watch, he had enough time to walk through the gardens before his appointment.

Uri was a recruiter, but he found himself doing more bounty hunting than actual recruiting. Furloughed mercenaries, with too much time and money, gave the local constabulary a headache. Not officially under contract, the men were required to sign prior to deployment. Once tagged, the rabble-rousers were ordered to deploy or face incarceration by order of the Smirnov Legal Code.

Either way, Uri was performing a public service by getting them off the streets.

Cossack Point's gardens were the pride of Tiraspol, the showcase of the "future city." Alkonost made efforts to transform the capital into a working vision, their city planners embracing the inevitable. Rice paddies, doubling as bioreactors, lined the arboretum's causeways. Islands of tropical pine intermingled with manicured mangrove, adding floral density to the garden's intimate space. Everything had a dual purpose. Behind the scenes, in the underground waterworks, filters strained oxygen from the supercharged growth, plumbing enriched gas back into the city's air distributors.

Above the gardens rose the Alkonost Tower and Central Command. Standing among the roof's forest of antennas was the statue of the mythical Alkonost. A massive bronze icon, the angel-headed raptor glowered over Cossack Point, arrows clutched in her talons ready to strike the enemies of Nova Byzantium and Alkonost's beloved Transnistria.

Uri passed through the park's southern gates towards the Dniester's shopping arcades and the arena. Like sculptors, Tiraspol's architects had turned its Euclidean harshness into luxuriant ziggurats. The city was a conurbation of concrete terraces, leafy canyon-like streets interconnecting the districts. The place welcomed the Post-Industrial Shock. Each oxygen-starved ashfall infused the city with a renewed lushness, the runoff a boon to the hydroponics towers.

He reached the arena by sunset. Stopping at the food carts, Uri had a red cabbage roll and a shot of vodka prior to checking the odds board. Three

matches tonight, his recruit would be the middle act.

Blood sport, an export from Nova Byzantium, was a gladiatorial circus embraced by Tiraspol. Barbarian slaves captured on the frontier were the favorite opponents, their ferocity like caged animals. Uri took a seat in the risers and thumbed through the odds book. Two Carpis were matched against his man. The odds makers put the outcome at fifty-fifty. Not so much big as they were stealthy, Carpis had a knack for speed. To beat them, the Alkonost gladiator would have to act decisively.

The spectators, mostly composed of veterans, wandered in and took their seats. The arena mimicked a Zen garden, islands of granite surrounded by raked sand. The obstacles were a Tiraspol addition to the typical arena landscape, a nod to Alkonost battle ideology and Sun Tsu's philosophies of terrain. Rules allowed for weapons, but nothing edged. Unsanctioned contests of sine missione, "without release," while illegal, were known to exploit an array of medieval cutlery; no one had the stomach for a lingering death.

The first match was slow. The slave was a fanatic Chechen with a poorly healed gunshot wound to his right trapezius. Gimped, he could barely lift the aluminum baton, making for comic theater. His opponent, a heavily tattooed Alkonost, hesitated to bash in the slave's head outright, instead lobbing limp blows into the Chechen's midsection. The crowd wasn't having it. Jeers poured down from the upper seats until the shamed Alkonost grimaced and disarmed his opponent.

It didn't last long. One blow to the Chechen's skull, and the bearded slave folded to the sand. The victor lifted his arms, triumphant, but was met with a wall of boos. No one had made anything from the bets. Even worse, the battle lacked the necessary drama.

After intermission, the next bout was announced: "The Vampire" versus two nameless Carpis of inferior breeding. Led out in hobbles, the barbarian duo's physiognomy looked of a lower Romany caste, pigeon chests, beady black eyes, sloped foreheads, and blemished skin. Balkan clans were a stratified ilk, their hierarchy emerging from tribal conquest and interbreeding. Despite their bloody servitude, the two were doubtlessly better treated in captivity than at home. Escaped slaves were given little quarter upon return. Shame and dishonor was treasonous, the tribal chieftains' punishments deadly.

Lieutenant Sava Valis entered the arena opposite. He wasn't the mercenary Uri remembered from Moldava. Chrome fangs had replaced his missing canines, no doubt the basis for his nom de guerre. Subconjunctival hemorrhage reddened the whites of his eyes. Aggression drugs caused coagulopathies, increased blood pressure, and thinning of membranes. Bloody noses were common, wounds and cuts bled easily and copiously. Intricate tattoos of ribbed bat wings on his bare back extended from shoulder to shoulder. Looking the modern Dracul, Sava played the monster with flare. Agitated, he paced the sand.

"Christ, Sava. What's got into you?" Uri whispered to himself.

The crowd cheered and waited.

Clad in nothing but leather kilts, the gladiators' flexed their bruised torsos. The arena arbiter unchained the barbarians and handed each man a bifurcated pole separated by a chain. Sava squatted and spun the cudgels.

The Carpis circled and exchanged blows to probe for weaknesses. One of the arena's obstacles, a stone pyramid, shielded Sava's back. The crowd roared with each lunge. The barbarians tried to lure him away from his sanctuary, tempting him with an easy target. Another explosion of fighting, the sound of clacking mahogany filled the arena as the match grew ferocious.

Sava hissed. His red eyes were aflame, brow pinched, fangs dripping with saliva. The Carpis showed no emotion as they fought. Ignoring Sava's demonic tableau, they focused instead on tactic. Stepping out from the pyramid's protection, Sava struck the nearest Carpi. A blur of whirling poles pushed the barbarian back until he stumbled into the arena's concrete wall, knuckles barked, elbows skinned, cringing. Set to deliver the final blow, the other Carpi leapt onto Sava's back. Using his poles as a garrote, the barbarian cinched the connecting chain.

Choking, Sava crunched down and pulled the Carpi off his feet, then slammed him into the pyramid. The barbarian gasped for breath. Unrelenting, Sava descended like a cobra, sinking his chrome fangs into the man's neck and shoulder. The shrieking Carpi tried to crawl away but Sava had him pinned. The arbiter sounded a warning horn, a signal for the belligerents to desist. Sava ignored it, blood dripping from his mouth as he bit the Carpi again.

The other barbarian, back on his feet, pounded Sava's head and spine. Undeterred, Sava continued

his orgy of violence. The crowd turned quiet as the fight took a macabre turn. Facing forfeit, bets were being lost. A shout came from the upper tier urging the arbiters to stop the match. Receipts floated down like confetti. The attack was a violation of the "edged weapon" mandate. Two arbiters activated their shockers and approached Sava.

"Stand down!"

Berserk, he ignored them.

Blue sparks arced across his metal teeth. Rigid with electricity, Sava fell away, tearing a mouthful of flesh. His victim lay motionless, viscous purple pouring from his carotid into the clumped sand. The arbiters tried to hold the other Carpi back, but the barbarian was enraged, pummeling Sava into unconsciousness.

The match was over.

Uri left his seat to find the slave pens and medical bays. Flashing his recruiter badge, the arena guards led him to the bed where Sava lay. His vitals were stable, but left untreated, his wounds would become septic. A medic wiped the sand grit from his face and removed his vampire fangs. Missing his incisors, he looked bucktoothed like a rabbit.

"We had a rough winter, didn't we, lieutenant?"

Sava's eyes fluttered as he lifted his head to nod.

"Your time in Moldova got to you a bit, eh?"

Sava closed his eyes and tried to inhale deeply, wincing from broken ribs.

"Command's authorized initial deployment prior to contract authorization from Constantinople. We're moving out shortly," Uri said, lighting his pipe.

"Where?" Sava whispered.

"Baku, in the eastern Caucasus. It's the staging area for the newly branded Operation Alexander. They're bringing down a flotilla from the Volga for the amphibious assault."

"What's the mission?" Sava said, slipping in his less monstrous bridge.

"Secure the Caspian's last proven oil reserves. The sea's northwestern basin is depleted, just a trickle from Azerbaijan. So, it's off to make a beachhead in Turkmenbashi."

"I've never heard of the place," Sava said, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed. One of the medics grasped his deltoid to administer the antibiotic injections while the other deftly wrapped his broken ribs with wet mesh.

Uri continued, "There's a warlord there who controls most of the conurb and Awaza oil complex. We're going to reinforce him."

"That's way outside the frontier."

"Yeah, it's a mess: child soldiers, cannibals, rape on a massive scale. Just another day, eh?"

"I can hardly wait."

"No dead zones though, that's the good news. It has something to do with the Karakum's desert winds."

A sweaty man in a tracksuit burst through the swinging doors, a gang of angry bookies rushing in behind him. He was the promoter, and furious over Sava's subterfuge. Uri tried to step in but was met with shoves. A tray of medical instruments clanged to the floor as the rolling stand toppled over. A man grabbed for Sava's throat.

"Enough!" Uri shouted, pointing his 9mm pistol at the mob. "Back off! Alkonost official

business." He flashed his recruiter ID, warding the men back.

"This man cheated! People lost money."

The arbiters stepped in and convinced the men to leave.

"I think it's time you signed," Uri said, pulling out a fingerprint scanner.

"And leave all this behind?" Sava smirked. "I was just beginning to make a name for myself. A few more bouts and..."

"Tiraspol isn't our home, Sava; you know that. We're just circus animals here, chained and tethered. It's all a recruiting tool to get us wild animals back into the fight, So, sign, please."

"Do I really have a choice?"

"No brother."

Sava reached out and thumbed the glass. A green laser crisscrossed the tiny skin folds. The LCD glowed with Lieutenant Sava Valis's Alkonost profile, ARIN number, and status: Activated.

"Report to Field Bay Two a week from today, got it?"

Sava nodded.

#

Uri stepped onto the deck of his conapt and lit his pipe. Decameters below, the jungle maze of Tiraspol's linked landscapes lay static and quiet. Black pinpricks of marsh birds filled the setting sun's blur. The air was thick, stuffy, and full of cinder.

He pulled up a white plastic chair and sat down. These ubiquitous chairs, mankind's most prolific invention, he thought. From Constantinople to the ruins of Moscow and beyond, no landscape was devoid of them. Their injection-molded plastic

would be the geological hallmark of a brief industrial age. Knocking through the strata with rock hammers, post-human archaeologists would one day unearth the "White Chair Line," an epochal demarcation between the Holocene and the Post-Holocene. With pyramids and cathedrals dissolved into loam, humanity's legacy would be nothing more than mass-manufactured convenience.

He walked back inside, shut the slider, and turned on the climate filter. The ionized whoosh of conditioned air chased away the burnt smell from outside. His duffel lay open like a gutted animal, a set of neatly folded fatigues half thrown in. Packing was a painful exercise; simple choices about what to take and what to leave behind exhausted him.

Slumping into the couch's dusty cushions, he glanced down the hallway. Like a vault, the door to her room remained sealed. It was a non-feature, like a carpet stain, something the brain conditioned the eyes to unsee. But in the late hours, when the city offered no other distraction, Uri couldn't ignore the emptiness.

The constabulary had informed him there wasn't much they could do. They only had jurisdiction within Transnistria, and filing a report with Nova Byzantium was pointless. This sort of thing happens all the time, the gendarme explained, especially in the conapts of active-duty personnel. Then there was the quip about "looking in his own backyard," which enraged him. Uri fought the urge to punch the bastard, the last thing he needed was a civilian report on his military record. Knocking around Tiraspol's law enforcement wouldn't solve anything.

He had been begging her via shortwave to rethink. He had cajoled, he had threatened. Another couple of months and he'd be back from Moldova, if she would just wait. A week after the call the line went dead, his communiqué inbox empty. Back home he discovered she was gone, her room left undisturbed. He checked with the building concierge. Despite a few rumors, he didn't have much to go on, just a description of an Alkonost recruit, probably her lover.

There'd been a deployment to Kharkov around the same time, Operation Allied Saint. The deployment was sentinel duty, low-level enforcement, and a likely destination for greenhorn mercenaries. Girls often followed their men into a war theater. Alkonost Command had no formal policy forbidding it. Uri contacted a few comrades working the operation and asked them to keep an eye out.

At the age of fifteen, she was already turning out to be just like her mother.

He popped a flask of single malt and toured the conapt. Gathering himself, he swallowed his shame and opened the door. The smell overwhelmed him, the fruity lotions and perfumes of a teenage girl. Closing his eyes, he breathed deep and felt the tears well. Dusky light from the curtained window drained the room of color, its bright pastels dulled. He sat on the edge of her bed and smoothed the pink paisley duvet. Propped on the pillow was the plush bear he'd given her for her tenth birthday. Button eyes watched him, inanimate and cold.

Uri knew he couldn't spend another night. He quickly finished packing the duffel and left. The conapt wasn't his home, just a closet filled with

the clutter of a past life. Someday he would own up, but not tonight.

#

"Do you know why you've been flagged as a Section 12?"

"A candidate for desertion? I have an idea," Uri replied.

"It looks like you've been divorced for five years," she said, reading from her monitor. "You've a daughter as well. Missing. There was a report filed."

Uri nodded and took a sip of vodka.

"Any attempts at extortion, ransom demands made by kidnappers, that sort of thing?"

"No. My daughter left of her own volition. I'd rather not get into it."

"I apologize if the question touches a nerve, Lieutenant Vitko, but I-and-I obliges me to ask."

"Is that what this is about?"

"Somewhat. The system's soft logic performs an initial evaluation. It's up to us, the psychiatric staff, to complete the profile."

The fifth ward of the Alkonost's central hub was I-and-I's division for internal audits and investigations, a quiet complex of interconnected glass offices built around an artificial pond full of lily pads. The psychiatrists were civilians. Employed by command, they were accessed to the highest security levels.

"And what's your take?" Uri asked, getting up to pour more vodka from the liquor bar. "Am I a risk?"

"As you know, there're other entities in the world that need Alkonost's talents but wish to subvert the overhead of hiring the mercenary company outright."

Uri raised an eyebrow. "Anyone in particular?"

"You just have to look to the night's sky."

"The caliphate? I wouldn't think those Arab spacemen need mercenaries."

"No one's quite sure what they're up to, but I suspect there's a need to protect their secrecy. As the best trained and most professional, Alkonost veterans make tempting recruits."

"Might be a good gig," Uri winked. "They probably pay in gold."

"Are you aware of the punishment for desertion?"

Uri slashed his forefinger across his neck, and then sat back down in the lounge. "I'm well aware."

"The way I-and-I sees it, these recent events in your personal life... you've no immediate family or registered next of kin, correct?"

"Right," he said, knocking a few ice cubes around his tumbler.

"These recent events can be extremely isolating, and isolation has been shown to breed divisiveness, a bifurcation of loyalties. This is our main concern. Are you devoted to Alkonost's mission statement, do you see yourself as a citizen?" she asked, reclining in her desk lounge, hands folded neatly in her lap.

Uri stared at the abstract print on the wall and pondered. He hadn't given his allegiances much thought. A mercenary, by definition, was a contract soldier hired to do the bidding of whoever was paying; loyalty was bought and sold. There were binding treaties established with Nova Byzantium—rules regarding enemies of enemies—but this did not constitute patriotism. Her questions were academic and antiquated, decoupled from the world of the Post-Industrial Shock.

"Can I ask you a question, doctor?"

"Please."

"Have you ever been to the frontier?"

"No."

Uri realized she was quite striking, dark hair peeking out from a headscarf, almond eyes, and a crisp pinstripe dress suit that conformed to her body's curves. She was of aristocratic ancestry, maybe from Ankara, Nova Byzantium proper. Lacking the educational infrastructure, most of Alkonost's support staff was expatriate.

"Let me tell you about it. It's drowned, empty, hot, poisonous, suffocating, roamed by anthropophagites, troglodytes, and all shades of inbred mongrels in between. We're a species in competition with birds, insects, reptiles, and even bacteria for survival. How many are left do you think?"

"People?"

Uri nodded, finishing his vodka.

"A billion, maybe less."

"Less and less each day. There're vast stretches of permanent dead zone. Those fortunate enough to escape the anoxia... starved. There are places," Uri leaned toward her as if to whisper, "only a few thousand kilometers from here, where you wouldn't recognize the people as Homo sapiens. They've regressed: naked, minimal use of simple tools, lacking even a spoken language. Their clock's been reset by sixty thousand years, and..."

The doctor interrupted him. "Lieutenant Vitko, I'm not sure what you're getting at." She took off her glasses and crossed her legs, the synthetic swoosh of nylon.

"I'm trying to paint a picture of the mercenary's world for you, doctor. Notions of true

loyalty?" he shook his head, "We don't think like that."

"Then what binds you to Alkonost?"

Uri sucked the last bit of alcohol from the ice then set the glass down on her desk. "Let me explain it this way, when mercenaries come back from deployment, their old life... just doesn't work anymore. There's a truth we can't easily communicate, and it's maddening," Uri said, pointing to his temple.

"They call it the 'Cassandra Complex' in psychology," she interjected.

Uri shrugged. "To know in your heart that no matter how well we maintain our phalanx, the borders of Nova Byzantium will inevitably shrink and disappear with human beings quick to follow, it..." Uri paused.

"Lieutenant?"

"It becomes a simple question of survival, doesn't it?" he continued. "How to carry on day-by-day, and in what capacity: as a starving barbarian, scraping and scavenging to get by, or as a soldier, with a line of logistics, ammunition, enrichers, and provisions?"

"So your loyalty is a matter of survival, then?"

"That's how it works doesn't it, evolution? Sad, but true. We are animals after all, motivated by self-interest," Uri said.

"That's bleak."

"And fucking depressing."

The doctor said nothing, scribbling down a few notes as Uri sank into his chair.

"And as far as desertion goes," Uri continued, "You and your headshrinkers can tell Command—or whoever—that as long as the Antonovs keep

airdropping pallets of fuel, rounds, and food, my loyalty won't be a problem."

"All right then. Our time's about up," she forced a smile. "Thank you for your candor, Lieutenant Uri Vitko. You've offered me a unique perspective, however nihilistic."

Uri pushed out his lower lip and nodded his head. "You're welcome, Miss Bashir." He stood up and straightened his fatigues.

"And lieutenant... I'm sorry to hear about your daughter. I hope you're able to find her," she said.

"She was a beautiful girl."

"Still is, I'm sure."

"I can only hope."

Someone knocked on the door. After an uncomfortable pause, Uri walked over and opened it. Captain Zelinski. Uri snapped a quick salute and stood at attention, eyes forward.

"At ease. Lieutenant Vitko, I haven't seen you since Bicz. Mission intelligence, you paid us a visit, remember?"

"I-and-I's brig, of course. It looks like they've redeployed you. No more Moldova, eh?" Uri said, backing up to let the captain into the psychologist's office. "Sir, I'm not sure if you've been formally introduced to Miss Bashir. I was just answering a few questions for her."

The captain raised an eyebrow. "Oh? Hopefully nothing out of the ordinary."

"No, of course not," she said, uncomfortable. "Can I help you with something, captain?"

"They received a call down in the lobby. Apparently, Lieutenant Vitko's not responding to his console. I was on my way up to drop something

off. So, I thought I'd come by and deliver the message personally, maybe say hello."

"I must've accidentally left it back in the barracks." Uri said, a half-truth. "Is there a problem?"

"One of the Antonovs is overweight—your brigade—and they need to do a gear check."

Despite regulation, mercenaries packed their gear full of contraband, mostly booze, drugs, and the usual. A plane flying into a war zone couldn't afford to be overloaded. Most tarmacs were primitive and prone to sabotage. Aborted landings were common.

"I need to head back to the airfield. I could give you a lift?" Zelinski offered. "My car's out front."

"Thank you, captain. I'd appreciate that."

The car, a six-wheeled executive model, EMP hardened and with blacked out windows, pulled into I-and-I's roundabout. The driver opened the door for the captain and Uri. Zelinski was under-ranked to have his own car, but working for I-and-I afforded perks only spooks and spies could finagle.

"You're fond of cigars? I had these shipped from Thrace. I've my own humidor. Try one." Zelinski pulled out a glass tube and handed it to Uri. Obliging, he popped the cork and slid the cigar out, brushing it under his nose.

"Aromatic." Uri pulled out his naptha lighter—an Alkonost winged abstract embossed on brushed aluminum—and lit it. "Smooth, not bitter at all." He puffed his cheeks. "What's on your mind, captain?" Uri knew there was an underlying motive for Zelinski's generosity.

The captain hesitated. The uncomfortable silence gave way to the hum of the car's wide-treads rolling over the byway's asphalt. "I just wanted to take this opportunity to thank you, lieutenant."

"If you could refresh my memory, captain. Thank me for what?"

"You warned me about Illithium back in Bicz. I stopped the program a few weeks after your visit, firing Morosov's ghouls not long after. The intelligence we were getting from those Carpi zombies was questionable. Despite a few successes, more coincidence than anything, it was a bust." The captain looked out the window, gripping his console nervously.

"Right, the brainless idiots. Was there any attempt to mitigate the growth?"

"Popov—that was his name—tried to slow the self-assembler's metastasizing process. Something about 'tricking' the micro-machines to shut off. But then the networks spread through the whole body like a geometrical mesh, no longer confined to the cranium. It was a fucking mess. At one point they even tried an irradiation process, using collimated strontium emitters to retard the networks."

"And?"

The captain shook his head. "Their bodies started to petrify. The networks hardened. It turned them into a bunch of goddamned 'pickleheads.' "

"Pickleheads? Not a clinical term, I'm guessing."

"It killed them, but slowly. God awful," the captain sighed. "The fleshy membranes hardened like mummies. Damn disgusting. All that gluey

flesh, eyes imprisoned in sockets, tongues withered like jerky. It stopped the growth all right."

"This Popov, didn't he say something about growing these Illithium networks on something else—like a petri dish?"

"I don't remember. Maybe. But when it comes to that sort of stuff... Morosov are snake oil salesmen, always looking for the add-on contract. Luckily the colonel agreed with my decision. It was back to water boarding, finger clamps, and high voltage," he smirked.

"What about the body dumpings?"

"We never found out who did it. Finding the perpetrators wasn't a big priority with all the abductions and beheadings. Goddamn savages."

They arrived at the deployment center, a large cluster of climate-controlled domes grouped around the central airfield. Inside the superstructure were the Antonov hangars and repair bays, a termite colony of mercenaries and support crews prepping for airlift.

Baku was technically a "friendly" territory, relaxing the requirements for the planes to arm with weighty cloakers, optical jammers, and counter-measures. It mattered little however, like goldfish in a bowl, the mercenaries' gear grew and expanded to their personal weight limit.

"I'm off. I've some business to attend to," said Zelisnki. "Best of luck. I've read the briefs on Turkmenbashi..." he paused. "...I'm sure it'll be an interesting logistical and tactical challenge."

"-It's a shithole, captain. A mess, and I hope Command's given some serious thought to our extraction."

"There's no snowing you with platitudes, Lieutenant Uri Vitko. Anyway, I wish your men the best of luck. You have my long-wave routing number. If you need additional I-and-I support, let me know..." he offered his hand.

Uri shook and saluted. "Vae Victus. Woe to the conquered."

"Right," Zelinski saluted, smirking.

The audit was well underway. Uri's company of thirty men stood cordoned near their designated aircraft. As 2nd lieutenant, Uri was chief logistics officer responsible for payload. One of the specialists had brought Uri's duffel out from the barracks and measured it, his gear well under the fifty-kilo allocation. A portable scale was wheeled around, piles of contraband accumulated at the protesting men's feet.

Uri examined the mercenaries' gear. It was typical stuff: vodka, pornography, bricks of Assyrian hashish... One agitated recruit tried to make a case for his "knife" collection. Inside a canvas roll he had polished medieval implements, a fauchard, a halberd, a guisarme—all minus their poles—a few saw-edged axes, and assorted butchering knives. Standard issue survival knives limited one's ability to work clandestinely, he argued. To kill silently, he needed more range. Uri didn't buy it.

Another disappointed recruit tried to smuggle a few extra kilos of bar soap and chocolate bars. A typical currency for whoring on the frontier, child prostitutes always enticed by the latter. The airmen were ordered to dump the soap into a nearby tub skid for redistribution, as Uri personally handed out the chocolate bars to the loitering men.

"Lieutenant Sava Valis," Uri saluted. "How's your platoon coming along?"

"Fine. I've managed to recruit Mach for the cause," Sava smiled, nodding at the lean, but muscular specialist standing behind him.

"You're overweight. Not the typical nonsense, I see." Uri looked over Sava's set of hard cases and weapons bags. "The gladiator racket paid off, eh?"

"You might say that," Sava said, eyes darting.

"Mind if I have a look", Uri asked, lifting an eyebrow.

"Sure." He took a step back, nearly stumbling over Mach's kit pile.

Uri squatted and inventoried Sava's gear: two trace sensors, a hummingbird drone, a satchel charge, a brand new Vepr with radar tracker, and a medical kit.

"Can you pop this open?"

"No problem." Sava knelt and thumbed the medical kit's lock.

Morosov tech, but what it did, Uri wasn't sure. The corporation's catalogue of medical equipment was vast. This, with its servo-actuated syringes and chrome-weave tubing was enigmatic. Inset in the hard case was a wireless activator. Next to the remote were vials of bright liquid stored in padded rows.

"What does all this do?"

"It's experimental—a free trial version from Morosov. The way it was explained to me," Sava said pensively, "using a small catheter, it's supposed to give you a cranial oxygen boost using an active metabolic feedback loop, or something. Good for marginal dead zones and anoxic environments. A small computer monitors your

vitals to keep it tuned." He patted the receiver.
"I thought I'd give it a go."

"Unfortunately you're overweight, lieutenant. But if you toss out that satchel charge and a trace sensor, you should be good."

"I can probably live with that."

"Speaking of Morosov, Sava, I just had a talk with Captain Zelinski, your former CO back in Moldova."

"Oh?"

"He told me about Illithium's demise. What about the body dumpings, were there ever any leads?" Uri asked. "Strange, that whole business."

Sava looked him in the eye and shrugged. "Haven't a clue. I heard about it though, everybody did. Somebody really had it in for those Carpi knuckle-draggers, eh? Too bad, all that... very ugly... very ugly indeed," Sava grimaced.

Uri knew Sava was the culprit, his accomplices probably scattered about the company—his buddy Mach maybe. Sava wasn't a bad guy, Uri figured, just unpredictable and wily: a kid. He could do nothing to punish him. What would be the point? The campaign was now a mop-up.

After Uri left Bicaz and Moldova, Alkonost established a defensive cordon along the Ceahlau Massif. Halo bombers created a mile-wide path of scorched earth using incendiaries, insuring nothing living could cross. It was a draconian solution, but effective.

[NB] CHAPTER TWELVE

February 2164 C.E.

His waist surrendered another belt hole. Jan Mayen was taking its toll. The Morosov inoculates were causing acute side affects. The worst was chronic nightmares. Despite a concrete wall dividing the billets, Sava's neighbors needed earplugs to block out his nocturnal outbursts. Alcohol, antihistamines, a brick of opiates, all failed to quiet his loud reactions to the terrible dreams. Mach mentioned an occasional odd dream, but nothing as severe—or loud.

"Most of the time, I can't move. There's something holding me down, my legs are either anesthetized or missing. I hear voices, children in a watery chorus. Colors are dark, but vivid. There's always a rotting smell, like dead vegetation, vinegary. Then there's the god-awful cramping. The tendons in my feet have gotten really bad. In the morning, I can barely walk." Sava relit his cigarette stub and took a drag.

"You remember smells from your dreams?"

"It depends." He put out the stub and took a sip of coffee; it tasted like the paper cup.

"If the odor's half as bad as the breakfasts around here..." Mach tried to joke as he pushed his reconstituted eggs around the tray.

"What about you?"

"Just the typical. My hands though..." Mach flexed his grip. "It's so bad sometimes, I can't even button my trousers. I have to run my hands under hot water to loosen them up, so numb and painful."

"Chemotherapy's got to be easier. Give me fucking cancer instead," Uri smirked.

"Do you think it's like Illithium?"

Sava grimaced and narrowed his eyes. "No, that was just one experiment among thousands. They've long since shelved it for military applications. They've since adapted Illithium for more recreational purposes, remember?"

"Right," Mach nodded, knowingly.

"Morosov cranks out everything from sub-dermal malarial mesh to smart-skin tourniquets. There's always side affects. We'll adapt to this in time."

"If you say so."

The mess was empty, the idling ice machine and refrigerator hum breaking the mausoleum quiet. Yakiv shuffled in wearing a tank top and shorts, his freshly grown beard matted with sleep and drool. Sava, as commanding officer, had relaxed military discipline. "Viking chic" seemed appropriate for Jan Mayen. With the men's physical stress, the high-and-tight approach was burdensome.

"Did you run out of trazodone, Yakiv?" Mach smirked.

"No, I'm awake... at least I think I'm awake." His eyes were twitchy. His clammy hand rubbed his sweaty sternum; the recruit looked agitated.

"You look spun up. That stuff got you wired?" Mach asked. "A side-affect of those little blue pills the doc's got you taking, eh?"

Yakiv sat down and folded his hands, meditative, lips pursed. He had something to say. Sava poured another cup of freeze-dried Selassie and pushed it in front of him. Sava and Mach raised a curious eyebrow at each other, waiting for Yakiv to speak.

"What is it, Yakiv?" Mach asked.

"Do you believe in ghosts?" he asked, eyes darting quickly.

"Is this another side-affect? Maybe you're having nightmares," Sava said.

"I saw something near the southwest sally port, that long skinny window just above the gate, you know the one?"

They both nodded.

"The medicine was giving me a headache. I couldn't sleep, so I left my room. I was going to the mess, and I saw something out the window, near the horizon. A flicker of sails, fading to green."

"Are you sure?"

"As sure as I am sitting here talking to you."

"Is it still there?"

Yakiv nodded, getting up.

The passageway was cold and bare, the window's narrow rectangle filling the space with predawn gray. Yakiv rubbed his biceps to warm himself and squinted out at the dreary seascape. He pointed to a spot near the shoreline of Jan Mayen's western rise. Sava zoomed in with his starlight scope, focusing on a small cloud of Auks circling the algae beds. The scope's grainy amplifiers melded with the swirling birds in monochrome noise.

"This was the spot, eh?"

"Yes, near the nesting grounds."

Sava pulled back as a bright flash swamped the scope optics. Mach and Yakiv gasped. Sava disabled lowlight mode and took another look. Wavering through the ocean's gaseous breeze was an islet of green phosphorescence. With zoom at full power, he realized it was no wayward ship; it was more extraordinary than that, an iceberg coated with sheets of phytoplankton and bacteria. Far from the

picturesque gleam of white, the iceberg was stained with yellow sulfides and microorganisms.

"It's an iceberg," Sava said, passing the scope to Yakiv and Mach.

"How's that possible?"

"They say there's a glacier or two left on Greenland, high up on the inland plateau," Sava said. "It might've calved off and drifted out from a fjord. The tidal wash is incredible this far north."

"Glaciers?" Yakiv shook his head, "not possible."

"There's a few small ones left in the Alps and the Urals."

They saw another flash then the luminescent burst of afterglow. The iceberg's microscopic colonies didn't have the metabolic firepower for such a lightshow. There was another source of light. Sava looked at the leaden skies, no lightning-filled thunderclouds. It was coming from the island itself, eclipsed by Jan Mayen's western headland.

"What's causing it?"

"It's a searchlight or something, really powerful, coming from the island, somewhere beyond the plateau," Sava guessed.

"It's giving me the creeps," Yakiv said, eyes glued to the binocular shroud.

Mach's forearm console beeped. "It's operations. Wilco's picking something up on VHF."

#

They hovered around Wilco, the Crown's radioman, waiting for the broadcast to repeat. Timed in thirty-second intervals the signal was in "Old Morse," a mix of cryptic radio semaphores. Long defunct, Alkonost had ceased teaching the language

to new specialists. With no one able to decode the message, Sava ordered Wilco to record, distort, and display the audio in time series.

"Do we have a basic radio manual?"

"How about an electronic copy?"

"Perfect, bring it up on screen."

Another recording of long and short beeps was enough to correlate and process the rudimentary signal. Sava wondered why anyone would use such an antediluvian code. The "human modem" was far less reliable than its microprocessor counterpart. Panning the distorted pulses, Mach scribbled down dots and dashes on a pad of paper.

"I got it. Bring up the manual and scroll to the appendix, to the alphabet."

After a few minutes of transcriptions, Mach set down his pencil and stood as if to give a speech. He started to read the message, but stopped, confused.

"What's it say?"

"This is some one's idea of joke. Somebody's having a laugh," Mach said as he silently reread the notepad.

Sava shook his head with dread. He knew what was written on the crumpled paper was not a joke, or at least not intended as one. The Crown bled the squad of pranks, reduced their high jinks to quips of black humor; Jan Mayen's existential hangover was too sobering.

Mach read the note at last. "Alkonost stop you are never leaving stop no resupply stop I know what's in the vault stop ARIN 2112-313-1100 stop"

"Let me see that." Sava grabbed the note and read it.

"Whose Arin?" Yakiv asked.

"Nobody. It's an Alkonost Recruit Identity Number, A-R-I-N, encoded into your ID implant when you were recruited. Everyone has one," Sava said, handing the note back to Mach. "Mach, are you sure you decoded it right?"

"I'd have to have one active imagination to scramble the code this badly. Wilco, can you find out where it's coming from?" He turned back to Sava. "Remember a few weeks ago, the incident with Yakiv?"

Sava nodded. "The intruder."

"Well, it looks like our friend has found a way to communicate with us at last."

"Whoever the hell he is... probably a deserter. He must have come in with the last logistical crew. Gone bat-shit insane or something. They probably tried to haul him off on that Mi-26 when he escaped."

"Do you think it's true, that we're never leaving the island?" Yakiv interjected.

"Consider the source, Yakiv. I'm not putting a lot of faith in Jan Mayen's resident hermit psychopath just yet," Sava reassured him.

"I've got it," announced Wilco. "The direction finder's honed in. The signal's coming from two hundred seventy-five degrees west, northwest, just over the Moon Mountains." "Moon Mountains" was the squad's nickname for Sor Jan, the alien landscapes of Jan Mayen's western highlands. Sava stashed the note in his leg pocket.

"The contents of this note do not go beyond the four of us, got it?" Sava ordered.

"What do we tell the others?"

"Tell them it's an anomalous communication, currently indecipherable. Understand?"

"Got it," they each replied.

More squad members filtered into the meeting room for the early morning shift change, smoking cigarettes and rubbing the sleep from their eyes. Mach unrolled a dusty map, anchoring the corners of the parched canvas with ammo clips and a canteen. Sava briefed the new arrivals on the morning's excitement. The men hunched over the gridded contours as Sava pointed out Jan Mayen's geological and manmade features. Besides the litter of abandoned weather stations, a marine observatory, and the ruins of a whaling hut, one location stood out.

"The intruder has activated the lighthouse on the northern coast. There's a LORAN beacon used for ship-to-shore, he must have hotwired the transmitter," Sava explained.

Before the Post-Industrial Shock, the Kingdom of Norway had sponsored a retrofit of Russia's aging atomic lighthouses. The Norwegians were so fond of their restorative handiwork, they built a few within the kingdom itself. Anachronistic yet romantic, the beacons guided ships through the newly thawed Northwest Passage. They were unmanned, robotically timed to the Arctic Circle's seasonal sunrises and sunsets. The lighthouse on Jan Mayen, like the rest, had succumbed to the affects of sulfuric salt fog and vermin infestation and no longer functioned. Until now.

"The lamp: that's what lit up the iceberg. We'll go out and scrounge around. See if we can find this intruder," Sava said. "It's a hike, fifteen kilometers. It'll take a day to get there and a day to come back."

"Full kit, field bag, rifles?"

"Yes."

The men moaned.

"Listen, you jokers!" Sava lifted his head from the map and addressed the room. "There's somebody out there playing a game, and I'm not about to underestimate the ability of one bastard to wreak havoc. If he's an Alkonost deserter, and if that Halo out there's any indication, this guy's fully trained and adept at survival, evasion, and escape."

"Also savvy enough to hotwire a centuries-old mothballed mini-reactor," Mach added.

"That too," Sava sighed. He didn't want to admit it, but despite its madness, the note's message weighed heavy.

[NB] CHAPTER THIRTEEN

October 2163 C.E.

Miriam and her contacts were seated in the corner office atop Norsk-StatOil's Maslak skyscraper when Uri arrived. The room was sparsely but tastefully furnished with expansive windows overlooking the umber gloom of Constantinople. Three strikingly blond men in sleek silk suits sat facing Miriam. Their Latin was weakly accented, refined and succinct, each word chosen thoughtfully. They possessed an ephemeral quality, like souls destined for an unnamed heaven beyond the apocalyptic materiality. Uri couldn't help but be impressed.

"I'd like you to introduce you to my partner, Uri Vitko. He's an archivist—a survival specialist—who'll be escorting me. He's under contract to The City like myself. Uri, this is Einar, Gunnar, and Jarl," Miriam said.

"How do you do?" Their handshakes were cold but dry, blasé limpness. They nodded briefly at him, cobalt eyes concealed by black-framed spectacles. Uri took a seat next to Miriam.

A holdover from the Pre-Shock, the Norwegian oil conglomerate Norsk-StatOil sought refuge in Nova Byzantium's post-industrial law and order. Constantinople exploited the corporation's talents to wring the last black drops from Earth's strata. Oil, however, was not their primary endeavor. The lucrative extraction and refining contracts bought them time and capital to pursue other unspoken aspirations.

"Norsk-StatOil has commissioned an Alkonost Antonov for the journey to Jan Mayen," said the man introduced as Einar. "They will fly you and the meteorological equipment to an atoll. While beneficial, installation of the weather station is to be the cover story for delivery of your payload. This is a joint mission. And our relationship with our co-sponsor, The City, is not to be discussed with representatives of the mercenary entity. Understood?"

Both Miriam and Uri nodded.

"Once installed, we will use The City's uplink to transmit the weather data back to the empire from the atoll."

Uri concluded that "The City" referred to Al Fadah Madina.

"In my mission briefing, I was informed that—"

"Uri has been briefed on the diplomatic issues regarding The City and Constantinople's proxy war in Al Quds," Miriam interrupted.

Uri slumped into his chair and sullenly sipped from his water glass, annoyed by her interruption, but only briefly. This was her deal after all, and he was out of his element. Spoke only when spoken too, the unsaid rule.

"Norsk-StatOil built the vault on Jan Mayen," Miriam explained to Uri, the three Nordic gentlemen nodding in agreement, "a joint venture between Einar's subdivision and The City. They know of your payload and are acting liaisons to Alkonost. Jarl's already made arrangements with Tiraspol; our flight leaves in one week."

"Mr. Vitko," Einar interjected, "it is my understanding that you are former Alkonost. If you don't mind me asking, why did you desert?"

Uri was taken aback. No one had, strangely enough, ever asked him the question. The reasons felt obvious. To verbalize it—to actually say it—was another matter. Uri thought for a minute, eyes drifting over the ceiling grates and Lucite paneling. Fidgeting in his seat, he tried to find the right words.

"You're safe here, Uri—no traps, microphones, no cameras," said Jarl, pointing and eyeing the room's nooks and recesses. "We use Alkonost's services time-to-time, but we're not informants. We're just curious."

Miriam nodded for him to speak.

Uri took a deep breath. "Well... I was serving in Dagestan, defending the viceroy's government from the highland Azars. A chronic dead zone had settled over the Northern Caspian, a salt fog choked with steppe methane. The viceroy had retreated to foothills of the northeast Caucasus." Uri took a sip of water before he continued. "Unfortunately, their reserves were in default, and they had no bullion to pay for our brigade. When winter arrived, flights couldn't land for extraction—too much enemy fire, bad runways—a whole host of excuses. Politics were involved, and we were ordered to wait it out. We were starving, so I left."

"Just as easy as that?" Einar said.

"Not so much. I left my men behind—they refused to come with me—so I hiked south over the mountains. Barely alive, I followed the lights," he said, pointing to the ceiling.

"The City, yes, navigating by the stars," Einar mused. "But you must be aware of Alkonost's punishment for deserters."

Uri shrugged. "Yes. A beheading in Cossack Point, it's a weekly tradition; I'm well aware. I've stumbled across a few Alkonost in my work as an archivist. With short deadly tours, mercenaries tend to not remember faces for very long. I'm capable of handling such an eventuality, I assure you."

Mercenaries were incurious. Suspicion about whether or not a stranger was former Alkonost wasn't typical. There were always exceptions, of course. Most old vets were dead vets, and the retired tended to stay put in Tiraspol after their tours.

"Good. We've managed to supply you with proper Norsk-Statoil credentials, if you should need a proper cover story," Einar smiled. "We wish you the best of luck."

"If I may ask you a question, Einar?" Uri added, as Miriam reprimanded him with a cold glance.

"Please."

"Nuclear payloads, procured by The City, delivered to a vault built by Norsk-Statoil... I don't get it. Is the installation some kind of reactor?"

"It's complicated, and I'm not at liberty to discuss the specifics," Einar replied coyly.

"Right." Uri smirked. "I suppose they're not paying me to ask questions, either. Fair enough."

They said goodbye and headed toward the elevator at the opposite end of the floor. Norse art—if one could call it that—decorated the hallway. Woodcarvings of fierce pagan gods glowered from polished granite walls. The leafy face of the "green man" gazed up at them from a floor mosaic. Inside the elevator an English—or Scandinavian—

voice called out the level and prompted them. Uri found all of it unsettling.

"Extinct languages spoken by a blond Vikings, ancient religions now defunct. I don't get it," Uri admitted. "Who are these jokers?"

"What's not to 'get?' " Miriam responded, gazing out at the rain-streaked windows of the elevator.

"So Norsk-StatOil built this vault on an arctic island... to do what, store Al Fadah Madina's nuclear arsenal? The sheikhdom pays in gold, but it can't be just about the money. All this skullduggery right on the empire's doorstep."

"You ask too many questions. You're paid to deliver a payload. Nothing more."

"I'm well aware." Uri sighed, frustrated.

Miriam was just as cryptic as her paymasters. Maybe he was inquiring too much. Clandestine information was the currency of his world; he shouldn't care, it all paid out the same. But he did care. It provoked his imagination like so much else recently.

"This geological payload you and I are about to deliver," Uri asked, trying a different tact. "I wasn't aware of it; it wasn't a part of my contract. What's it for? Can you tell me that much?"

"Norsk-StatOil is proving out a meteorological theory. They believe the Post-Industrial Shock is a climactic hiccup, and that the warming will reverse," Miriam explained. "But I don't share their optimism."

"A new Ice Age?" Uri laughed.

Miriam tilted her head and shrugged. "Chaos theory predicts it as a strange attractor, it's a possibility, however improbable."

"Whatever."

Uri watched the darkening sky through the elevator glass. As they descending toward the plaza geodesics, streams of runoff poured from the roof spillways. Like a sunken Atlantis, the sodium glow of street lamps filtered up through the sloshing water. Arriving in the main lobby, Uri retrieved his satchel from the guard booth.

"You're supposed to have a permit for that," the guard admonished in broken Latin. The man had been snooping. Uri nodded and snatched the canvas bag from the heavyset man.

"Mind your own business," Uri said, flipping him a shekel bribe as they left.

"Did you bring your handgun with you? That guard's probably calling the gendarmes. Do you want to get thrown in a Byzantine jail?"

Uri shushed her and exited through the whoosh of the lobby's automatic doors. Out in the plaza, Miriam ran up to him like a niggling sibling, impatient. Ignoring her, he sat down at the bar of a food cart and ordered a lamb shawarma. Miriam clenched her fists. Uri was about to dig into the spicy meat and yogurt sandwich when Miriam elbowed in next to him.

"What're you doing? Why won't you answer me?"

Uri pushed his forefinger to his lips, and then batted an eye over his shoulder at Morosov's facade. "It's my side job. There's a fellow named Popov. He should be arriving soon. I need to talk to him—one way or another," Uri said, patting the Zigana inside his satchel.

"The gendarmes will see you, and they'll call in the centipedes—you're jeopardizing everything."

"Have a kebab," Uri said, lifting a finger to attract the vendor's attention. He closed his eyes and savored his food. "This is wonderful. There

are things I do miss about the empire—Miriam, please, have a seat. Talk to me.”

“I don’t want to be around when you pull your stunt, so...”

Uri grasped her by the forearm and pulled her towards him. Her nostrils flared with rage, dark eyes wide with insult. “Who do you think you’re talking to?” Uri said with a furrowed brow. “You must really think I just fell out of the sky, huh, some neophyte hack? This is what I do, Miriam, and I’m no stranger to this type of work. And this type of work is what Al Fadah Madina pays me for, in case you’ve forgotten.”

“It’s a miracle. I don’t know how you survived out there. You’re rash and foolish.”

“How did you survive, Miriam, before coming to Nova Byzantium?” Sava said, his thumb firmly over the Farsi slaver brand on her inner arm. They both looked at the scar. “What about that?” He let go of her and turned back to order a mint lemon tea. She stood frozen, eyes flashing.

In the few days he’d known her, Uri had managed to exploit the few rips in her veil of secrecy. And in the process, he’d stitched together a mosaic of Miriam’s fragmented life.

As a girl, she’d attended a madrassah funded by one of Al Fadah Madina’s missions in northern Persia. At the peak of Alkonost’s bloody Alborz engagement, the mercenaries were hired to strangle supply lines feeding the Azeri insurgency. After a year of too much bloodshed and too little success, the place became a hellhole. At the conflict’s height, Miriam fled the madness. The details of her escape remained vague. How she fell into the hands of slavers was a mystery.

"I give you my word, Miriam. You can trust me. I know what I'm doing," Uri said, striking a soothing tone.

"I will say this to you, archivist—"

"Uri."

"I will say this: I don't want to rely on you for anything. But if I do—Allah have mercy—I expect professionalism and a regard for caution. I've risked too much to just..."

Worked up, she was short of words. She ran a tense hand through her thick shoulder-length hair, a few strands falling into her eyes. Uri paused and noticed moistening eyes, something in her voice, lips pensive and clenched. He wanted to reach out, but instead handed her a cup of hibiscus tea. She took and sipped it.

"Miriam, I give you my word."

She silently set the cup down and walked away, disappearing into the rush of suits and pedicabs.

The evening crowd thinned as Uri loitered and smoked his cigarettes. His stash of bazaar cigarillos was running low; he needed a substitute. Trying to avoid the camera surveillance, he made a circuit of the plaza, finally settling into a Raki lounge. He maneuvered through the jostle of well-liquored suits and claimed a barstool at one end of the U-shaped bar. Looking past the phalanx of bottle spigots, he had clear vantage of Morosov's main entrance. He ordered a drink and waited.

Anatolia Raki was too fiery and fummy for his palette; the sweeter honey notes of whisky was more his style than the empire's bitter anise hooch. He swirled the milky liquid around in the tumbler before setting it on the polished granite. Uri observed the mingling crowd opposite him. Most

were business types having an after-work drink. Re-enactors of a gilded age, they were caught up in the romanticism of a bygone era, forgotten with recent generations. He thought it a pity. Too infused with the life outside Nova Byzantium, Uri was not envious.

Another round, and he stubbed out his cigarette as he watched a man exit the escalator from the transit station just outside. He threw a few shekels on the bar and shouldered his way out onto the air-conditioned streets. With his duster draped over his left arm, concealing the Zagana, he sped up next to Popov.

"Don't make a scene and you won't get hurt," Uri whispered.

Popov spun around. "What's going on here?"

"You have a Zagana 9mm pistol aimed at your heart," he said, revealing the barrel under the coat's folds. "Set for an automatic low-recoil burst with a modified muzzle velocity, each bullet is designed to tumble, causing the maximum damage to soft tissue. One false move and three rounds will carve a fist-sized hole through your sternum. You'll be dead before you drop, understand?"

"Yes, yes I do," Popov said, his afternoon stubble glistening with a sweaty sheen.

With his free hand, Uri hailed an executive cab and motioned for Popov to get in. He handed the driver a napkin with an address then took a seat across from the squirming engineer.

"Where are you taking me?"

"Somewhere quiet and out of the way. I need to ask you a few questions," Uri said, propping his pistol up with his knee.

"Ask then. There's no need for this. I'm a reasonable man."

"Perhaps. Do you remember me, Mr. Popov?"

Popov turned to look at Uri, squinting in the tinted light. He shook his head. "No... No, I don't."

"Lieutenant Uri Vitko, Bicz, Molodovan Campaign. I sat in on one of your auditing sessions, an interrogation using Morosov's Illithium technology."

"I oversaw dozens of interrogations. If you were present, I don't remember you. Is that what this is about?"

"Captain Zelinski pulled Morosov's contract shortly after I visited his brig. Do you know why?"

Popov shook his head, "That effort was closed out years ago. I..."

"Seven years and eight months, to be exact. It was winter."

"Yes, okay," Popov sighed pensively. "It probably had something to do with funding. I'd been told Alkonost leadership wasn't wholly satisfied with their investment and—"

"But that wasn't the end of Illithium, was it?"

"We Morosov do not pursue technologies that aren't profitable. Our research is guided by the desires of our customers. If Alkonost and the empire do not express interest in a particular product, research funding is reallocated."

"But you've other customers for Illithium, correct?"

"No. It was an intelligence gathering system, purely and solely, a technological asset needed by the clandestine organs of nation-state entities, and since there aren't many of those left..."

"You're lying," Uri interjected. "I don't believe you."

"Believe what you want, Mr. Vitko, but this abduction is completely unnecessary. I can forward you Illithium's official project report. All our findings and data. It's all right there in black and white. Just let me go."

"What about Illithium's gray market clients?"

"I wouldn't peg you as a conspiracy lunatic, Mr. Vitko." Popov quipped. "So can I presume you're an Alkonost auditing agent. Worried your investment's getting sold off?"

"I don't represent Alkonost."

"Then who do you represent?"

"Let's just say, I'm inquiring on the victim's behalf."

Popov looked out the window but said nothing.

With its submerged manors and palatial estates, Bebek District formed an archipelago of sagging rooftops. The streets' tidal channels were choked with hydrilla and yellow-green mats of duckweed. Closer into shore, a network of floating docks connected the sturdier mansions to land, their top floors aglow with kerosene lanterns. Except for the occasional fisherman and salvager, the district was deserted. Like tree sap in winter, Bebek's wealth had retreated inland from the Bosphorus, closer to the root system of Constantinople's infrastructure.

Uri paid the driver, tipping him with a stack of shekels as he motioned Popov out of the vehicle. The path leading to the water was gnarled. Mudslides and the polluted runoff had dissolved the tarmac, leaving a ruined trail of broken asphalt. Popov stumbled over tree roots and rock piles in the dusky light.

"Where are you taking me?"

Uri lifted the gun and pointed it at Popov's head. "Too many questions. Just walk."

"I demand to know where you're taking me!"

Uri pulled the hammer back, loading a round into the chamber. "Enough."

They followed a creaky maze of catwalks snaking along the buildings' edges, ivy and hibiscus blooming out of shattered windows and drooping balconies. Uri shoved Popov into an empty doorway. He tripped and fell to the slate tiling. The room was empty except for a wire-wicker chair surrounded by set of battery-powered klieg lights. Uri had rented the place from Beyoglu's Russian arms dealers, just in case. It had only taken a few bottles of vodka and a war story or two to finagle the deal, unbeknownst to Miriam. Uri needed a safe house, and her flat was out of the question. Street interrogations could be quick messy affairs and he needed an appropriate amount of space and time to work. The Muscovites assured him that the local hermits would be compensated well enough to ignore any screams.

"Sit."

"I guess you're serious," Popov said, sitting down in the chair.

Uri raised an eyebrow. He pulled out a set of tie straps and cinched them around Popov's sweat-drenched ankles and hands. "I want to know about Illithium... after the Alkonost contract."

"I'm bonded to a security arrangement. They'll throw me in prison if I divulge that information. I'll be sent to gulag."

"So, it's true?" Uri stood up and crossed his arms. "Morosov continued Illithium after the contract ended, eh?" Uri said, lighting a

cigarillo. "You mentioned repackaging the growth, using petri dishes or something."

"I'm not at liberty to discuss..."

"Are you serious? Who has the gun here, Popov?" Uri asked, waving around the piece.

"I don't care."

Uri smacked him in the chin, bloody drool dribbled from his punctured lip. "I've thirty caseless rounds in this clip," he said, holding up the auto-pistol. "Enough firepower to reduce you to a pile of blood, bone, and fat."

"All right!" Popov cried, his voice shaky. "Replaying the broadcast directly into a user's mind bypasses the middleman and eliminates the need to reprocess vast amounts of alpha-wave data by computer. It's just a direct read/write capability from one mind to another."

"What about the 'pickleheads'?" Uri exhaled a plume of smoke.

" 'Pickleheads'?"

Uri smacked Popov again; his wire-frame glasses flew across the slate floor and shattered. "The test subjects—the zombies! Did you fix it? Did you make the process survivable?"

Popov shook his head slowly. "No... no, the signal-to-noise was too high for the MEGs to record alpha-waves outside the cranium. The self-assemblers had to be grown inside the cortex near the brain's synaptic junctions."

"Meg? Who're you talking about?"

"M-E-G: 'MEG': Magneto-Encephalography—a technique using miniature magnetometers to record brain activity, similar to Pre-Shock MRI technology. To get this level of fidelity, there's just no way to get around the intrusive inductive networks; it's a necessary evil."

"So, you're still creating monsters?"

"If that's what you're calling them."

"Morosov... Christ. You assholes are nothing but a bunch of goddamned ghouls, you know that? I fucking knew it." Uri stormed around the bare room. "I should do what's left of the world a favor," he said, firing off a burst above Popov's head.

Popov coughed, a cloud of mildewed dust raining on him. "Don't kill me," he begged.

"Give me a reason, Frankenstein."

"I'll tell you everything. What else do you want to know?"

"The thought readers. What are they? How do you make them?"

"Jellyfish."

"What?"

"The Black Sea blooms, medusas, millions of them. They're perfect and they're plentiful. The MEG networks grow on their mesoglea. The toxins in their tentacles neutralize the runaway metastasis. It's something we've never been able to duplicate in humans' cortical networks. Since the write sequence doesn't need high signal-to-noise, a facial bond is reactive enough to couple for broadcast."

He hadn't brought the mask along; but it was exactly what Popov described. When hydrated, the thing unfurled like a jellyfish, gooey tentacles reaching out. Sculpted to resemble Hindu relics, the ornamental grafts were bio-engineered fetishes tailored to gray market customers. No longer fragments of voice and images, the short-term memories were a fully rendered sensorial experience.

The same old problem remained, however. With no means to retard the self-assembler's growth, the recording targets always died from the implant, just like the doomed Carpis he and Krajnik had encountered. Reliving an experience through someone else's eyes meant that person would perish. The executions, the stoning, and the burnings... it made cruel sense now. Embedded with Morosov's shit, the condemned were doomed to die one way or another.

"How are memories stored inside the medusa MEGs?"

"Chemical cuing, polymer triggers that align the associative networks."

"Like a tea or a broth?" Uri asked knowingly.

"Could be. Please, I've told you everything. Let me go, for Christ's sake," Popov pleaded, his chin swelling with a purple contusion.

"Who's buying this shit?"

"Marketing isn't my forte."

Uri kicked the engineer in the chest, knocking him over in his chair. Landing on his back, he heard a wet pop. Unable to free his hands, one of his shoulders had dislocated. He writhed in pain.

"I don't know who's buying Illithium!" Popov screamed.

Uri put the muzzle to the man's stringy hair.

"I heard something about The Red Light in the Beyoglu," he yowled. "Sex stuff and all that. That's all I know. I swear!"

Uri could only imagine how such a form of vicarious prostitution worked. He chose not to think about it. "And what about a Kali death cult, the Hindu Thuggees?"

"Huh?" Popov's eyes were rolling back, tears welling up from the pain. "I don't know anything

about any of that."

Uri lifted his boot ready to stomp.

"Honest to Christ! I don't know! I don't know!"

Uri believed him.

Fire-walled from Morosov's distributors, Popov wasn't privy to the ends of his monstrous science. It took Morosov's marketing goons to come up with an application suitably warped for the gray market. Uri had learned what he needed to know from the pathetic engineer. Morosov was the builder of the Thuggee's mask, having adapted it from Illithium's technology. The Thuggees were just their clientele.

"What're you going to do with me?"

"Centipede weather radio is forecasting a level three dead zone in the next twelve hours, not even safe for housecats. So unless you've got the metabolism of a monitor lizard, you'll be blue and cold by morning."

"You're not going to leave me here?"

"I was thinking about it, unless..."

"Unless... unless, what?"

"I need to give you an injection before we can go any further?"

"What's in it?"

Uri shook his head, clicking his tongue to the roof of his mouth. "Not so fast. Patience. What's it going to be, Popov? It's late and I need a drink."

"Do I have a choice?"

"Not unless you can hold your breath for seven to eight hours."

From his satchel Uri produced a preloaded syringe full of a silver-blue liquid. Ironically, the dose of mystery was a Morosov product, something he'd bargained from the Russians. He

stabbed the needle through the starchy wrinkles of Popov's shirtsleeve and pushed the three ccs of solution into his deltoid.

"What did you just do to me?"

"You're an educated bio-logics designer, surely you've heard of binary poisons."

From the look on Popov's face, he was well aware. Designed as a mirror polymer, the poison and its antidote were counterparts. Alone, they acted independently as a slow venom-mimic, released at steady rate from a nano-timer catalyst. But when recombined, they neutralized themselves. Popov could stumble back to Maslak, limp into his lab and madly research the poison from Morosov's vast catalogue, or he could simply do what Uri requested.

"I want as much information on Illithium as possible. Everything you have access to: the final reports, engineering, test runs, legal documents... everything."

"Most of it's modeling simulation data. It won't make any sense to you."

"I don't give a shit. I want it. Once you've uploaded the data package to my anonymous account on the imperial data hub, I'll send a cab to Maslak's central plaza. Inside will be a mini-case with the antidote. Understand?" Uri said, crouching near Popov.

"Those nano-timers are known to be faulty. What if it triggers too early?"

Uri shrugged. "It's a chance I'm willing to take."

[NB] CHAPTER FOURTEEN

November 2156 C.E.

The hydrofoils fanned out over the Caspian in a delta formation. Quick and maneuverable, they floated above the sea, darting in and out of each other's wakes like porpoises. Just over the glass horizon, past the salt-bergs, Uri spotted the oil refineries and decrepit beach resorts of Turkmenbashi's skyline. Columns of smoke billowed above the cityscape in spirals of dense soot. Like a netherworld inferno, Turkmenbashi and its southern peninsula burned continuously. In the Karakum desert, so much fire seemed impossible, but war generated enough tinder-bodies, oil, garbage-to keep the flames stoked.

Air cover was light; most of the invasion's Halos and Hinds were grounded back in Baku. One bomber and a few rocket-heavy gunships limped a few kilometers back for the initial assault. The official reason was "maintenance," a catchall for logistical snags in Alkonost's supply chain. The beach attack was shaping up to be exclusively amphibious. After reading the intelligence reports, Sava figured heavy weapons would be of little use anyhow. This was guerrilla war, urban and grimy.

Padshah Khan was Nova Byzantium's ally in Turkmenbashi; his army of raggedy men defended the city's oil infrastructure from two fanatical brothers named Farzad and Farzam. They were "foreigners," or so stated the official report: monastic wanderers from the oasis city of Merv in the Karakum. Engaged in a warped Nizari mysticism,

the nomads practiced a perverse depravity in combat: child sacrifice, slow torture, and decimation. Using a local radio transmitter, "The Brothers" as they were collectively known, preached crazed sermons to their fanatic militias.

Sava checked his console, 2.3 klicks to the beachhead. His mission was to link up with one of Farzad or Farzam's operatives to establish a liaison between the Padshah Khan and The Brothers. Making an end run around the Khan would risk Constantinople's shaky alliance. Diplomacy was of the utmost necessity.

The rendezvous was inland, southeast of Turkmenbashi's No Man's Land: a strip of shelled blight that sliced the conurbation's fang-like peninsula dividing it into two. To the northeast was the warlord's Turkmenbashi borough, friendly ground; to the south was the Awaza District and The Brothers. Alkonost's primary objective was to widen No Man's Land. Using Halos laden with napalm incendiaries, the mercenaries planned to blacken it—scorched earth—expunging the corridor of life and oxygen.

The hydrofoils shot for a decaying oil jetty and its pipeline terminal. The kilometer-long spit would be Alkonost's forward operating base once secured. Mortar fire erupted in geysers of saline mist, the agile boats quick to skirt through the fountains in a hectic choreography. Sava looked through his rifle sight. Next to a set of globular gas reservoirs, he saw a group of technicals: improvised dreadnaughts welded together from trucks, plate steel, and artillery.

"Do you see them?" Sava radioed.

"Yeah," Uri responded from a nearby boat. "There's a spotter on the far tower."

Deployed with Uri's platoon, Sava commanded his own detachment. Uri was aware of Sava's mission, but not the specifics. Mission intelligence required a strict "need-to-know," or so went the cover story. Now able to operate freely in the field, Sava could work his side job unfettered.

Checking the injection kit in his pack, Sava counted the crimson syringe ampoules. The Morosov agent gave him twelve growth catalysts, and he had already used one back in Baku. Quality was a must, with an added bonus for intensity, they informed him. The clients demanded something more than the usual snuff. Having read the brief, Sava was aware of The Brother's penchant for theatrical cruelty. Opportunities abounded.

The missile turret swiveled on gyroscopic stabilizers to lock on the target. The rockets hissed as they slithered out of their firing tubes; the barrage zeroed in on the nomads' technicals. Hydrofoil outriders paired in tandem, a spiral of smoky contrails approaching the enemy vehicles from all sides. Explosions rocked the gaswork's tanks. Unmoored, the corrosion-stained spheres tipped and rolled towards the Caspian, flattening the fiery dreadnaughts like marbles would ants.

The hydrofoil armada made another pass, taking potshots at the nomads fleeing the salt-caked jetty. The radio crackled with an "all clear." Reports of rifle fire slowly ceased. The whine of the gas turbines eased as the boats fell on their retracting foils. A swarm of Alkonost poured over the gunwales and into the chest-high water. Sava could taste it, the brine and creosote reek—the industrial decay of Awaza's alkali flats.

"Rally at the pump station. Do you see it?" Uri radioed.

"Roger that," Sava replied. "Next to the sump fire."

"That's it."

On the coke-peppered sand below the jetty wall, Sava assembled his men and checked gear. He put on his rucksack and adjusted its straps, clipping it into his webbing; the load was hot and cumbersome. He'd left his helmet in Baku, but the lack of bulky headgear afforded him increased situational awareness. Uri had lambasted him for it, ranting that it set a bad example. But it had no effect on Sava.

"There're a few dead-enders down the spit." Mach pointed to the shoreline. The incoming shots were poorly aimed, but potentially lethal just the same.

"Stay alert," Sava warned, crouched in the oily sand. "We'll mop up after Lieutenant Uri Vitko's little rally."

Uri was issuing orders to his men when Sava arrived. Sava was in a hurry, having to wait for his ad-hoc field briefs irritated him. But passive-aggressive protocol was Uri's tact, a method to maintain control. Sava learned from Captain Zelinski that Uri's I-and-I evaluation showed resilient moral judgment and marginal incorruptibility. And since Captain Zelinski, along with a few of the higher brass, was in on Morosov's gray market scheme, no one wanted to risk Uri's battlefield meddling.

"Lieutenant Sava Valis." Uri bit down hard on his cigarillo. "I want you to stay in radio contact every hour, understand? In case we run into resistance..."

Uri's mission objective was to highlight the Mi-26's bombing corridor with radar beacons, then rendezvous with the Khan's lieutenants in central Turkmenbashi. Sava would be south in the Awaza District. Fully infiltrated, he'd be unable to muck through the four or five klicks to quickly reinforce.

"I can't guarantee anything. We'll be covert," Sava explained.

"A moment, lieutenant?" Uri took Sava behind a demolished pump house. "You're trying to make a contact with The Brothers, aren't you?" he whispered.

"You knew that already. That's acknowledged."

"Then why are the details classified?" Uri asked, frustrated.

"It's our methods, our tactics," Sava lied.

"Fine, whatever. Look. I just need a guarantee you're not going to vanish. This place is fucking anarchy. We can't afford to rack up MIAs, got it?"

Sava nodded. "I'll radio on the encrypted channel when we establish contact with them."

"And just one more thing, lieutenant..."

Sava lifted an eyebrow.

"What's with the goddamned fangs?" Uri asked, referring to Sava's chrome incisors. "I thought you'd left all that shit back in the arena."

"Sometimes with these barbarians," Sava began, stroking his chin, "I've found it helps to spoon feed their own superstitions back to them, spooky bastards. Fear is a trenchant force multiplier."

"Fine," Uri said, dismissing him.

Sava gathered his squad for the long hike up the jetty. Enemy fire was light as they approached the shoreline. The nomad guerillas were retreating back to their nests. After climbing and cutting

through a barricade of metal and concertina wire, they reached No Man's Land and enemy territory. With its disemboweled buildings, Turkmenbashi was a city in name only, its littered streets nothing more than battlefield obstacles.

They worked their way down the garbage-strewn avenues, indistinct rot piled up with the twisted rebar and wreckage. Puddles of slime and jellied offal pooled underneath the brick heaps marking anonymous graves. The sour air was the most offensive element of Turkmenbashi, Sava realized, the marrow aftertaste impossible to rinse out.

"It just gets worse and worse here, doesn't it?" Mach noted, kicking through a smoldering campfire. "And we haven't even met the locals yet."

"Where do you think they're hiding?"

Mach shrugged. "Off setting up a booby-trap, probably. Miserable fuckers."

The chatter of gunfire interrupted them as the squad scattered and took cover in nearby ruins. Sava powered up his Vepr and activated the millimeter radar tracker. Through the weapon's sight, a gang of half-nude boys danced in the streets a few blocks away. With Kalashnikovs in hand, they turned and fired at Sava's position. A tall, scrawny boy with a pigeon chest lifted his RPG but held back.

"What in hell are they doing?" Sava whispered.

"Don't know, boss," Mach replied. "Do we take them out?"

"No... hold up. Maybe we just spooked them."

They waited. A few minutes later and the boys grew bored, drifting out of sight into a nearby alley. Sava pinched the bridge of his nose and squinted. He could feel the sweat drip from his eyebrows as he tried to think. Killing children

was out-of-scope. But these were boy soldiers, combatants, and if it came down to it, he wouldn't hesitate.

"We'll skirt the perimeter and launch a hummingbird, got it?"

His men nodded.

"All right, follow me."

The adolescent rabble grew louder when the squad entered an adjacent gutted factory. Shafts of mote-filled light spilled in through rips in the corrugated metal roof, highlighting the shadows. A pathetic moan came from the opposite end of the building, from somewhere amongst the junk.

"What the hell is that?"

They crept towards the sound, through a narrow lane between a row of chemical generators and an assembly line of rust-frozen robots. Sava turned on his shoulder lamp and panned it around. Something moved. Weapons drawn, the squad continued their approach. Plastic straps, cinched tight, pinioned the captive's elbows behind his back. His forearms were gangrenous, covered with seeping wounds. His skin looked like paper, desiccated from dehydration.

"Christ, how long as he been here?"

"Filthy bastards."

"Look," Sava said, flashing his torch on the boy, "he's dislocated his left shoulder."

"He's dead. He just doesn't know it yet," Mach added.

"I say we bust out of here and kill the dogs, now," one of the younger recruits blurted.

"Hold tight!" Sava ordered.

"What do we do with this poor son-of-a-bitch? We can't just leave him," Mach said.

Sava pulled out his sidearm and attached its silencer. A quick double-tap ended the debate. No one spoke as they drifted away to investigate the rest of the factory. Sava paused for a moment, bewitched by the tortured body.

Maybe it was immaturity combined with fecund imaginations, but a child's cruelty was unparalleled. The loss of innocence didn't bother Sava so much—he couldn't care less about the miserable shits—it was something else, a nascent jealousy. To be capable of such barbarity—the empathy knob turned to zero—it was preternatural, almost godlike and magical. Ruthless and savage, children could be brutal and should never be underestimated.

"Over here."

Stacks of wire cages stood against the far wall. Inside were the folded bodies of other prisoners, long dead.

"The cages are padlocked. They died like this, all crammed in like chickens in the coop. What the hell, lieutenant?"

"You read the briefs on Turkmenbashi, this shouldn't be a shock," Sava said. "Mach. I'm going to prep a hummingbird."

Sava took a small drone from his pack and unfolded its composite wings. A flip of a switch and the motors buzzed to life. Toggling his console, he put it in hover mode and calibrated the pitch and yaw controls. A detachable screen provided a multi-spectrum view. Sava engaged the hummingbird's whisper-mode to mute its buzz.

"There's a hole in the roof there," Mach pointed.

Sava guided the drone up, out of the factory and over to the adjoining lot where the boys were

gathered. He piloted the drone to the east and lowered the hummingbird into the morning sun for camouflage and to improve the image resolution.

"They've got somebody tied to a post. A woman or a girl, she's wearing a black abaya. But it's hard to tell," Sava relayed.

"An execution?"

"Maybe."

The boys were dressed in brass codpieces held together by hemp rope and colorful turbans flourished with peacock feathers. The older boys were smoking amphetamines using a butane torch and a scrap of metal. They staggered into each other, eyes fluttering in trance. A few broke out in prayer with their hands cupped to the sky as they begged strength from Allah. The oldest, maybe eighteen, sharpened a scimitar with a whetstone.

"One's got a sword."

"Shit! He's going to kill her."

"Hold on!" Sava barked. "Mach, how close are we to the rendezvous?"

Mach scrolled through his console, holding up the locator antenna to catch more of the signal. "Very close, less than half a klick. Who's our contact?"

"Not sure. Cranked up and tweaked—I doubt this crowd's much for parley."

Sava tracked the feral youths as his comrades crowded around the remote's palm-sized screen. The boy with the scimitar strutted towards the abaya-draped figure and began a Koranic chant in colloquial Arabic. The other boys cheered him on until he held the sword up and started to swing.

"No!" A recruit named Burian shouted.

"Quiet!" Sava roared, turning around.

Before they could stop him, the recruit ran for the doorway, his weapon drawn.

"Burian! Goddamn it!"

They were too late. Looking through the hummingbird's pixilated camera image, Sava saw the boy decapitate the girl—or what he thought to be a girl. The blade sliced to the post, but there was no blood. The body slid rigidly to the side and fell over to reveal a store mannequin underneath black georgette. The boys roared with laughter as the oldest continued to hack at its foam limbs.

"Stay here!" Sava commanded the remaining four. "Don't go after him. It'll give away our position."

Burian appeared onscreen firing his Vepr into the group. He cut down three of the younger boys, while the others gathered up their Kalishnikovs to return fire. Their rifles were shiny and gilded, crudely spray-painted with metallic gold and silver. Burian was outnumbered. With little weight to counteract the recoil, the boys fired erratically. But so close to their target, a few of the Ak-47's 7.62mm rounds hit home. Burian dropped, one of the bullets hitting him in the forehead.

The mob descended like vultures, kicking and dragging the dead mercenary around the dusty asphalt. The boy with the scimitar turned his hacking on Burian's corpse, struggling to sever his limbs, as another fired off a magazine into his pulverized cranium. Sava's men grew restless, thirsting for revenge.

"Come on, lieutenant! Are you just going to stand by and watch this?" a specialist begged.

"Do you want to end up like Burian?"

"But we can take these little bastards out."

"And stir up Awaza's hornet nest? If you run out there now, I swear to God I'll shoot you myself, understand?"

A quarter-hour passed and the defilement continued. The hummingbird's charge was running low, the remote's power meter glowing a steady orange. Near midday, a group of older Nizaris approached, coming to inspect. Much more reserved in their dandyisms than the boys, their faces were hardened and stoic. They put a halt to the boys' macabre desecration to inspect Burian, rifling through his webbing and kit for a clue to his identity.

Taking a chance, Sava lowered the hummingbird to eye level and flashed its LED array. The men backed up and aimed their weapons at the drone but held fire.

"What are you doing?" Mach asked.

"Trying to parley," Sava replied.

He activated the hummingbird's tinny speaker and addressed the nomads in his best Russian. Curious, the boys crowded around the hovering drone, grimy hands reaching up to touch it. But the older Nizaris, wary, stepped back.

"I am Lieutenant Sava Valis, do you understand me?"

The leader, a tall bearded Turkmen with a skullcap and bandolier tilted his head curiously then nodded. Strapped to his back was an impressive sniper rifle, its scope the size of a vodka bottle.

"Do you know who I am?"

The men huddled to discuss the matter, shooing the younger boys away. The leader turned and spoke.

"We know who you are. Imam Farzad and Farzam have been expecting you, Alkonost man. But we do not talk to fairies," he said brushing away the underpowered hummingbird. "Show yourself."

Sava nodded to his men, and they filed out of the dark factory into the street. Weapons down, they approached cautiously. The boys, high on mind-altering drugs, were hallucinating, trigger fingers itchy. The squad was careful not to make any sudden movements. Sava walked ahead and extended his hand to the leader.

"I am Jaweed," the man said, returning the handshake. "Brigade leader for Farzad's Jund al-Samaa, the 'Soldiers of Heaven.' You Alkonost men fight for our enemy Padshah Khan... why?"

"Because Nova Byzantium pays us."

"You fight for money?"

Sava shrugged. "Is there any other reason?"

Jaweed opened his mouth but said nothing.

"Look, Jaweed. Alkonost wants to end this conflict as quickly and cheaply as possible. If your imam and Alkonost's generals come to an agreement with the Khan, we'll gladly extricate ourselves. If you could kindly arrange a meeting with The Brothers, we'd be most appreciative."

"I'll see what can be done."

#

The mosque's turquoise dome rose above the neighboring hovels. Cratered and pocked by strafing, daylight filtered through its onion cupola in dusty shafts. This was the court of the Nizari kings, the brothers Farzad and Farzam. Near the Qibla, they sat facing each other and played a game of chess. Both had boyish looks and svelte bodies that hinted at androgyny or ambiguous gender. Their flamboyant turbans and peacock

feathers dispelled any notions of grizzled Karakum warriors. Whether they actually shared blood or gender was dubious.

Jaweed walked forward and prostrated himself before the two, saying nothing. The Brothers acknowledged the yeoman with annoyed glances and audible sighs. Sava looked at Mach and shrugged.

"So these are the men who've..."

"...decided to make war on our dominion," The Brothers said in Russian, finishing each other's sentences with nary a pause.

"We want to avoid war. That's why we're here," Sava spoke. "We're emissary proxies of Nova Byzantium, hoping to secure a ceasefire with your enemy, Padshah Khan."

"Oh?" both replied.

"Of course terms would have to be drawn up and mutually agreed upon. But Alkonost is eager to see this conflict resolved in an expedient manner," Sava continued.

"I'm sure you would. It would be..."

"...much cheaper, and it's very difficult to pump oil from burning derricks. We've seen your expeditionary army, very impressive. All that machinery, it must be expensive to field..."

"...in such a salty climate."

"Look, Farzad, Farzam..." Sava began.

"You will address the Imams properly!" Jaweed admonished sharply, still prostrated.

"And how is that exactly?" Sava said, exasperated.

"Holy Leaders of the Nizari Jun Al-Samaa, The Mighty and the Gracious, Khans of the Merv and its Realm," Jaweed intoned.

Sava rolled his eyes then continued. "Do you hear that?" A low rumble rippled through the

building, dust flumes pouring from crevices in the roof's chipped mosaics. "An Mi-26 Halo bomber escorted by two Mi-24 gunships, Alkonost is blasting a half kilometer corridor across Awaza to separate your territory from Padshah Khan's. A few auto-cannon batteries, and you'll be cutoff from the northern sector. Impotent."

Stopping their chess clock, The Brothers turned to look at Sava. He'd struck a nerve. They batted their eyes, heavily accented with kohl and green malachite. Both were thinking, telecommunicating between their minds with a fraternal sixth-sense. The gut-roiling explosions had stirred a salient fear, masquerading as quirky eccentricity. Both stood and approached Sava, the boy-soldier courtesans parting to encircle the squad.

"We both recognize the diplomatic impasses that will result from..."

"...such a contentious territorial dispute as we have here. A ceasefire both sides will accept may pose a conundrum. There must be a contest both sides will..."

"...agree to, the winner reaping the spoils of their offered accord. It's only civilized," Farzad and Farzad said, their identities indistinguishable to Sava.

"And what's the contest?" Sava asked.

"A game of kings and queens," they said, cracking sinister smiles.

"I don't understand."

"In this confusion, we find it refreshing to settle scores in gentlemanly fashion, black..."

"...versus white, clear winners defined by the succinct rules of the game board. So Mr. ..."

"Valis, Lieutenant Sava Valis," Sava interjected.

"So lieutenant, will you play Alkonost's king?"

"I don't play much chess. But there's a lieutenant I know who is exceptional, a highly rated player who—" Sava paused.

The Brothers shook their head in effeminate shame. Arms crossed, they glared at Sava with faux incredulity. Some of the older teenagers and young men giggled, hands girlishly covering their mouths.

After the crowd quieted, The Brothers spoke. "You misunderstand. You will play the game piece itself, one of the sixteen. Jaweed here will be our king."

Jaweed's jaw fell open in shock.

"He is quite the deadeye and a most skilled shot with a rifle. How is your aim, lieutenant?"

"Better than most," Sava replied, confused.

"Good. Good. You'll do the dirty work of your designated champion. There's an arcade near the front line, a hotel called the Grand Turkmen. Turkmenbashi himself, the Great Uniter, built a chessboard cloister there, fifty meters by fifty meters...

"...sixteen soldiers per side, thirty-two total. And you, lieutenant, will be our enemy king. We insist! When your champion—whoever you choose—takes a piece, you must eliminate that piece with your rifle. And the winner declares checkmate." Both laughed, their howls eerily synchronized. Sava's brow furrowed. "It looks like you're catching on."

"You're kidding?"

"No!" they squealed. "We're not!"

"Fucking hell," Sava whispered.

Mach coughed to catch Sava's attention, his head shaking. Although concocted inside the tangle of

bent minds, Sava was drawn to the concept, however lurid. The contest was no different than the gladiator arena, a mix of spectacle and blood sport. In the warped calculus of guerrilla war, to be able to dissolve the fog—to play black versus white—offered a liberating change from constant paranoia. Sava looked back and winked at Mach.

Mach understood, patting his kit with the Illithium ampoules inside.

"And if we agree to this, what guarantees do we have?" Sava inquired. "We would have to make a case to General Dobish, Operation Alexander's commander, and assure him you would not renege."

"Let's put it this way, what do you or the Khan really have to lose? We're reasonable men, and we understand..."

"...that if the initial terms of both side's proposed ceasefires is unreasonable, there will be no hope of peace. And despite our piety, we wish not to become martyrs. This chess match is like..."

"...a coin flip, but with more drama and theater. There's much to gain and we're weary of Padshah Khan's stubbornness. This violence is not our preferred means; we assure you. We rather prefer a battle of intellect," they said, tapping their temples. "Surely, you Alkonost are thinking men?"

"Of course," Sava replied. "Even if Dobish bites, I doubt the Khan will agree to it."

"If I read things right, he doesn't have a choice, does he? Without an imperial sponsor, his army..."

"...will be so much dust."

The Brothers had a point. Padshan Khan's men were more disciplined, but they lacked the nomad's reckless fanaticism. Farzad and Farzam drew followers from the Karakum's lost, an

inexhaustible horde of amphetamine-addled orphans drifting from oasis to oasis. Immersed in their Nizari fundamentalism, they were zealous assassins.

Alkonost had fought all shades of barbarians in its endless campaigns. Bled by a thousand cuts, Tiraspol had no stomach for getting stuck in an endless quagmire. Exit strategies were a must. Bizarre as the proposal was, it would be unwise for Alkonost to dismiss their lunacy. It was chess after all, a fair game of skill and cunning.

"I'll relay your offer to General Dobish," Sava said, bowing slightly. "If you could send a contingent, one of your lieutenants as emissary?"

"Of course!"

#

The smoke reeked of melted tires, the caliginous haze reducing visibility to a decameter or less. Three hours after the firebombing and No Man's Land continued to smolder. Sava radioed Uri and informed him of their situation.

Without friend-or-foe beacons, Jaweed and his escorts would be destroyed by auto-cannon. An Alkonost operator would have to cue the system, and the mercenaries weren't about to idle the targeting system. Too dangerous to cross at night, they would have to linger until daybreak.

"There's one hood between us, and half a filter. Maybe we can all crawl underneath and hug?" Mach joked.

Sava laughed until he surrendered to another coughing fit. He spat a wad of black mucous, provoking a gag. Most war zones had their special odors, but Turkmenbashi had a revolting taste, petrol and scorched asphalt mixed with rotting flesh and sewage.

Jaweed and his teenage escorts had rewrapped their turbans into an Al Quds style kafiya, mouth and nose covered to filter out the carbon particulates. They were used to it. Turkmenbashi was legendary for its retrograde dust storms, haboobs fueled by the Indian Oceans cyclonic super storms from the south.

The ground floor of an empty housing block offered refuge for the night. A sheet tacked over the doorway helped to repel the inky haze but the irritation and coughing fits persisted. At sundown, the light shifted to crimson, a mix of red sunlight and napalm. Agitated and nervy, everyone tried to relax and wait.

The Alkonost squad picked at their insta-paks of food, while Jaweed and his men gnawed on haunches of meat. Oddly shaped bones and peculiar anthropomorphic features made Sava cringe. Camel or goat, maybe, but the awful truth persisted. He tried to ignore their mastication.

"This chess match—" Mach said, speaking Ukranian. "Who do you know that's so damned good?"

"Lieutenant Vitko. Uri. I played him once on the hood of a tank back in Baku. The lieutenant spent his whole furlough in the basement of Pobeda's Lounge, smoking, drinking, playing the old veteran masters."

"But he has to agree to it, though. What're the chances?"

"It's possible. He's an uptight bastard, but Dobish could order him to play."

"If you're wrong about Uri, that guy over there," Mach said pointing at Jaweed, "will put a bullet through your skull. You know that, don't you?"

"I'm well aware. I've been there before, Mach, remember?" Sava said.

"The gladiator arena? But there you had a bit of freewill, at least. Here, you're literally Uri's pawn. If he falls to checkmate, that's it," Mach mimed a gun with a forefinger to his temple.

"Well, at least if I die, in that brief instant, I'll know it wasn't me who fucked up," Sava chuckled.

"You're crazy." Mach shook his head. "You never fought 'without release' did you?"

"Sine missione? A few matches, knives, and such... in the early days after Moldova. I was in the right mindset then."

"You never told me."

"They were illegal, Mach. I didn't tell anyone."

"Brutal shit, that. "

"Just a few scars for my troubles," Sava smirked.

"So, you're going to put your life in Uri's hands, eh? He's suspicious of you; I can tell. He knows you're up to something."

"Can you blame him?" Sava paused. " Look, Uri's honor bound to his men. His moral compass isn't as warped as the rest of us miserable bastards. It's in his eyes, a weird forlorn optimism; I don't get it, but..."

"What do you mean, optimism?"

"He hasn't given up on the world like you and me. I can respect that, I guess. He'll give it a go for Old Justinian," Sava said, pumping his arm.

Mach nodded.

"Anyway," Sava said, nodding towards Jaweed. "Speaking of warped moral compasses... shall we?"

"Yeah, we best get to it."

After their meal, Mach lit a chemical lamp; the concrete room filled with an eerie green light. Sava opened Mach's rucksack and sorted the medical kit. Finding the two placebo vials—oxygen-doping serums for hypoxia—he loaded the syringe and calibrated its catheter. He tried to catch Jaweed's attention, infusing the ritual with jittery eagerness.

He handed the actuator to Mach and knelt to expose the back of his neck. Mach swabbed the grimy skin with iodine, and then with the confident hands of a surgeon, inserted the long needle in between his cervical vertebrae. The automated pump evacuated the ampoule into Sava's neck. He let out a pleasure-filled moan for effect, his eyes quivering in faux ecstasy.

"All right, my turn," Mach said greedily, handing the syringe to Sava.

He was about to load the other placebo when Jaweed interrupted, his chemical urges overpowering. All the Nizari nomads were junkies; it was almost too easy, Sava thought. Back in Baku, he had to pay the local priests a stack of shekels to implant the teenage "witch" they were going to put to the pyre. It was more costly than he would have liked, but Morosov was offering a lot in exchange.

"You're curious aren't you?"

Jaweed crept over and sat cross-legged next to Sava. "What does it do?"

Sava shook his head, waving the curious Turkmen away. "I don't know. It's really strong shit. You won't be able to handle it."

"Try me."

Sava gave him an embellished pitch about the placebo's battle drug potential, nonsense about

invincibility and foresight, heightened reflex, etcetera. Mach found it difficult not to roll his eyes. Despite the overdone sales pitch, this was sensitive business and much was at stake. They had to stick to the script. Swapping in one of the Illithium ampoules into the syringe, Mach swabbed a patch on Jaweed's neck.

He activated the plunger and watched the nano-machinery's red serum disappear into Jaweed's spinal fluid. It would take three days before the synaptic network would grow sufficiently to broadcast.

"I don't feel anything," Jaweed said.

"You will. Just wait."

[NB] CHAPTER FIFTEEN

March 2164 C.E.

The tent smelled of anti-microbial detergent reminding him of a hospital. Sava checked the bivvy sack's vestibule and hood adaptor to ensure the seal was intact. Inching down into his sleeping bag, the blocky LEDs of his console flashed 05:00, another hour before the sun's fog lamp crawled topside. Shivering in his thermals, paranoid thoughts competed with grogginess.

He thought of the Morse note and its message of doom, of being stranded, abandoned, left for dead.. The Crown had a full year of rations. By then, if things got desperate they could resurrect one of Jan Mayen's beached ships or flag down a wayward salvager hopefully. However, humans rarely ventured this far out into the "survivoshpere." Nova Byzantium was the civilized campfire humanity huddled around, feral dogs scavenging the empires' table scraps. Sava's mind wandered to starvation. Would they end up like barbarians, cannibals feeding on their own? Worry was an addictive drug.

They'd gotten a late start from the Crown the day previous. The men struggled. The trek up the cliffs to Sor Mayen's Moon Mountains sounded like an oldster's day-trip: it was slow and complaint-filled. Packing twenty kilos of gear, but crippled with a nascent arthritis, the men only managed a few klicks before nightfall. Bivouacked under a comb of lichen-coated rock, their campsite faced eastward to the sickly flanks of Bereemberg.

Sava wrestled himself into damp fatigues and unzipped the vestibule. Half a kilometer up, the air was oxygenated, the tent's enrichment adaptor only a precaution. He slouched against a boulder and crumbled off pieces of protein cake. The yellowed bones of a polar bear lay jumbled nearby. Setting his breakfast down, he picked up the ursine skull and gazed into its bleached sockets like Hamlet meditating on Yorick's remains. Long extinct, the beast had walked to Jan Mayen on floats of ice centuries ago. Sava fingered its massive canines and gently set the skull down. Groans and coughs came from the other tents; the men were waking up.

Mach caught up with him on the trail to deliver a message. Their radioman, Wilco, had linked with the short-wave modem at East Anglia to check the mystery man's ARIN number. Decommissioned seven years prior, the identity had been erased or deceased—as was Alkonost custom.

"Does Wilco have any other leads?" Sava asked.

"Wilco, anything else?" Mach said tapping his earpiece and nodded his head to the inaudible voice.

"He's not a deserter," Sava interjected.

"Hold on, Sava's saying something," Mach radioed back. "He says the guy's probably not a deserter."

"Tiraspol keeps them on file for prosecution purposes," Sava continued.

Mach, annoyed by the simultaneous conversations, removed his earpiece. "You say he's not a deserter, boss?"

"I'm not sure who this guy is. Could be anybody. The ARIN number's probably a fake."

"Why would some one make up a message like that? It doesn't make any sense."

"Nothing makes any sense."

They reached the northern cliffs. Like a chess piece, the concrete lighthouse rose from a flooded reef just offshore. The jury rig was failing, the lantern room's lamp just a fizzling flash. Cursing the ankle-rolling ruts, the men shuffled painfully down the guano-splattered switchbacks to the shoreline. One of the recruits knelt to identify a set of footprints, combat boots but not Alkonost issue. Wading into the knee-deep tidal wash, they trudged over and climbed up a rebar ladder sunk into the landing.

Like a medieval rampart, the lighthouse's foundation was a wide rotunda of cracked concrete perforated by gloomy windows. The outbuildings and foghorns were consolidated into the construction, diaphones and storm halyards frozen by corrosion. Above, the tower's sun-bleached red-and-white painted stripes were the rusted lampworks. Faded signage warned of the radioactive hazard, they presumed. English and Norwegian were barbarian languages, no longer written.

A stint guarding the Odessa shipyards gave Sava a rudimentary understanding of radiation safety. A quick search of a contaminated sight would bring minimal exposure, he estimated. As a precaution, Sava instructed the men to put on their hoods and not inhale or ingest the deadlier alpha emitters.

"We need to form teams. Mach, check out the lower house. Take Yakiv. The others and I will head up and investigate the lantern room. Check your corners and maintain radio chatter, understand?" Sava said, loading a clip into his Vepr.

Reaching the top of the iron stairwell, they heard the lethargic whirr of clockwork straining

against oxidized gears. This was where the deserter—if he was a deserter—had camped. A metal bucket filled with burnt rubbish was fashioned into a makeshift stove, a midden of slimy auk and iguana bones strewn about. In an alcove off the circular room, they found the radio equipment and the LORAN's transmitter. A power cable, spliced from the stairwell's central pole, fed the juice from the mini-reactor to the radio's oscillator through a rack of electronics.

The deserter was adept. A soldering station fabricated from the guts of a high-amperage diode and improvised transformer sat on a rickety workbench near the railed landing. A flywheel, attached to a battery driven screwdriver, was notched with the Morse message. LORAN transmitters weren't equipped with modulators, so the deserter had used the carved notches to pulse the radio's test mode, syncing every thirty seconds with the lamp's rotator mechanism.

"This guy's resourceful. He knew what he was doing," Sava admitted.

"He was at this awhile," added a recruit.

Sava unplugged the power from the lamp's sputtering diodes. Short circuits sizzled with black smoke. Despite the ancient facility, the polished glass of the Fresnel lens gleamed like new, a jewel on the island's rusted crown. He removed his hood and stepped through a shattered storm pane to have a quick cigarette outside. Fog had pushed in from the north, the sour mist muting the morning light.

"It appears the deserter has deserted."

"Where do you think he went?" asked a recruit.

"I'd guess he was here a week or so, setting this all up. Not much to eat though. Starving and

thirsty, he probably went off to scavenge."

"Are we going to wait for him?"

Sava shook his head. "I want to get back before nightfall. This place gives me the fucking creeps."

Mach radioed from the basement. They'd found nothing. Sava's team descended to regroup. They entered the rank-smelling reactor room from a stairwell, a mix of sour iron and ammonia. The chamber was dim, a small window and Mach's torch barely able to chase away the shadows.

Seawater flooded the floor. The reactor's heat fins half-submerged. The ionized water swelled the metalwork with orange powder streaking the lighthouse's turquoise wainscoting. Sava alerted Mach to the radiation hazard and warned him to step out of the brackish water.

"That thing's hotter than a pistol," Mach exclaimed.

The refrigerator-sized reactor heated the chamber like a sauna woodstove. Beads of water fell from the cracked cement ceiling, the plops like a cavern's stalactite drip.

"This guy was here long enough to repair the terminals on the thermal generator and junction box. Look," Mach said, panning his lamp.

Sava heard a heavy static—the hiss of radiation. He felt it in his bones and hair, an electrical shimmer.

"We're getting the hell out of here," Sava said. "Now."

"But there're a few more rooms I'd like to check out down here," Mach said.

"I don't care. Something's not right."

"An ambush?"

"I don't know. Just a strange feeling, that's all."

"Can you be a little more specific, Sava? This place wasn't easy to get to," Mach argued, his hood puffing in shouts. "This guy could still be lurking around, for all we know. Don't you think it's worth a few more minutes?"

"Enough!" Sava yelled. "We're heading out now, Goddammit. That's an order, Mach."

#

They passed on their borscht insta-paks for a brief nibble of protein bars as they walked. Water was in short supply and it would take a good hour to purify any. Despite a steady chorus of dissent, Sava forced the men to march on. His stomach churned with agoraphobia and anxiety. An urge to hustle back and escape the island gloom quickened his step. He felt vulnerable and exposed.

They reached the island's central ridge by afternoon and stopped for a rest. The fog shrunk their world to less than fifty meters requiring Sava to expend precious minutes to gain bearings. Mount Bereemberg—Jan Mayen's de facto landmark—was shrouded behind a curtain of cloud. Without any visual cues, orienteering was instrument only.

"No offense, sir. But what's the rush?"

"We need to get back," Sava said, curtly.

"For what?" Mach asked.

Sava looked at him but said nothing. He brushed past the men's shoulders and walked ahead; the break was over. After a scramble down the Moon Mountains' tiered escarpments, Sava paused at the edge of a boulder field. A shift in the winds brought denser clouds to the highlands, the sun's silver disc wholly obscured. The cold breeze wicked the sweat from the men's fatigues and they

shivered. Sava was having problems getting a heading. Another hour hiking south and they would reach the southern sea cliffs and the Crown. They would run out of island eventually; they had to.

"Where's Mach?" some one asked.

"I just saw him. He was right behind me," Yakiv replied.

A quick count tallied four heads. No Mach.

"Pigheaded bastard, probably got fed up and took a short cut," Sava said.

Another minute passed without a sign of his specialist. Sava grew worried. He knew Mach. Hot headed maybe; he was never one to pout and stomp off, especially on the battlefield. Thoughts of the deserter stalking the windswept mountains for stragglers fed a slow-growing panic. He checked the radio and heard a low moan.

"Mach!" Sava yelled, tapping his radio earpiece. "What's going on? -Where are you?"

"I-I... I can't move, boss."

"You what?"

"I can't move! There's something wrong with me."

"Stay put, we're coming to get you."

They fanned out and headed back up the hillside, bulky silhouettes panning the mist with rifles at the ready. Calls of "Mach" modulated with the turbulent winds, stereophonic direction jumbled. The dulled shape of boulders drew the eye to inchoate Rorschach blots, basalt in the illusory shape of a man. Sava halted the squad and got back on the radio.

"Mach, let me know if you can hear this," Sava said, firing a burst from his Vepr.

"I... yes... you're right below me, I think," Mach mumbled.

A few more rifle/radio checks and their Brownian search came to an end. They expected to find the slumped mass of a sick man, but Mach stood upright, wide-legged and wobbly. His eyes were red, pupils dilated with a primal terror. As if ashamed or afraid, his head was slung low, gaze fixed to the windswept ground. Sava snapped his fingers to catch the specialist's attention. He looked up at him with tear-filled eyes.

"I can't walk," he cried. "They won't move... my legs. The joints, they're on fire."

"How can you still stand?" Yakiv asked, circling the statued Mach, curious.

"It hurts too much to sit. The blood doesn't feel right. And then there's my hips..."

"What's got in to you, Mach?" Sava exclaimed.

"It's the radiation. I'm having a reaction or something."

"No," Sava shook his head in doubt. "This is something else. Radiation doesn't cause this sort of inflammation. It has to be metal poisoning coupled with the treatment or something. Yakiv, Rudy, help me get him off his feet," Sava ordered.

"I'm going to die this way, aren't I?" Mach yowled.

"Stop! No, you're not."

Like rigor mortis, Mach's lower body was seized, the pain unbearable. Every jostle elicited a whimper and yelp. They leaned him awkwardly against the eroded flat of a cliff, his midsection arched, joints frozen stiff to avoid the excruciating pain. Chin forced into his flak jacket, drool poured from the corners of his mouth.

"Cut his pant leg. Take off a boot," Sava ordered.

Cutting a slit up his gray khakis revealed a scaly rash, jaundiced skin flush with streaks of what looked like hives. Black veins pushed from underneath the surface of his skin in a peculiar pattern twisting around his calf muscle and knee joint. Sava touched the flesh and reeled back.

"What is it? Sava! What's wrong with me?"

Sava didn't answer, all his attention focused on maintaining composure. Mach's leg was hot to the touch, swollen, the joints stretched and distorted into ball-like pivots.

"Mach," Sava said, gulping a breath. "When did this start?"

"A few minutes after we left the lighthouse. I didn't say anything—it was just my arthritis, I thought. But then there was the heat and the stiffness, all molasses and sludge. It's the radiation reacting to that shit Morosov put inside us all, isn't it?"

Sava shook his head, speechless.

He'd never heard of radiation sickness acting so swiftly; Mach's affliction was more like a reaction to snake venom. Even the engineers of Old Pripjat had a day or two before Chernobyl fully cooked them. There was something else in that flooded reactor room. There had to be.

Everyone looked at each other, faces grim and brows creased. No one wanted to admit it; no one wanted to think himself the victim like Mach, helpless and pathetic. A few shook out their legs and arms, exorcising the specter of ossification to reaffirm their own limberness.

"Why didn't you tell me earlier?"

"You wanted to get back to the Crown, and so did I. I-I figured I'd deal with this misery in sickbay. I didn't want to alarm anyone."

"Did anyone else step in the water?" Sava asked the men.

Yakiv came forward. He was with Mach in the reactor room. Pulling up his pant leg revealed nothing as extreme, just the same subdermal patterns typical of the Morosov treatment. Mach was enduring an adverse reaction to something: his body had revolted. Histamines in overdrive, his body was launching a full-blown attack on itself.

"It hurts to lay down. Stand me up, please."

They stood him to his feet again, his position ridiculous and rigid. Sava unfurled his deflated tent and wove rope through the grommets with the staking lines to make a stretcher. Painful or not, they were going to drag Mach back to the Crown and deal with him there.

"I'm going to give you a triple dose of antihistamine. It will knock you out for the trip back, okay?"

Mach nodded.

"I knew there was a reason I was in such a goddamned hurry," Sava sighed.

[NB] CHAPTER SIXTEEN

October 2163 C.E.

While doped up in one of Beyoglu's opium dens, Uri made arrangements with a balding Macedonian to partake of the mavi babeks—the "blue dolls"—in a local bordello. Idle speculation had led him to the peculiar brothel. When the Armenian pusher described the high to Uri, he knew it had to be Illithium. With a password and a little savvy, he found the bordello's back alley entrance.

Half naked and sweaty from the sauna, Uri waited as the pimp concocted his specialty. A whore offered him the pipe again, but he refused. The drugs had seemed like a good idea at the time, but no longer. The numbness was mutating into unease, raising feelings of dread and helplessness as his pulse raced. He watched another whore bring the pimp a wooden case decorated with caricatured engravings from the Kama Sutra. The Macedonian opened the box, his eyes wide and eager.

"Like a Roman god!" the pimp exclaimed as he fingered the grotesquery. "You will feel like the emperor himself, no?"

Uri doubted it.

Like the Thuggee mask, it possessed a similar shape that marked it as an Illithium MEG. Somewhere in the bowels of Morosov, a ghastly assembly line worked ceaselessly. This one had a special customization that made Uri's stomach churn.

Morosov's gray market designers had modified the jellyfish substrate into the shape of a tropical flower; the mask's appendages were orchid petals

instead of the Mahakali arms. In the center was an engorged pink vulva complete with clitoris. Equipped with special ducts, the design required no chemical bath like the Kali mask. A simple application from a syringe inflated the "doll" with catalyst. Minutes later, the thing moved its floppy hydrostats as it reached to embrace him. Uri's anxiety fused with nausea as he choked back his vomit.

The vicarious John who tried this would be dead post-coitus—he had to be—the Illithium's growth exploding inside his skull. No doubt fueled with impotence drugs, the babbling idiot would be unable to perform. Uri imagined the scene: a room full of Balkan thugs coercing teenage sex slaves into humping a zombie while a data receiver collected the brain stream. Dressed up victims in gaudy costumes, belly dancers, slave girls, various goddesses—mixed with a little torture and bondage—and the pornographic immersion would be complete.

As the pimp waved the writhing Illithium in his face, Uri decided his field research was over; he couldn't go through with it. He had more than enough to complete his report. If the caliphate demanded additional details, they'd have to strap on a reconstituted jellyfish and experience the circus themselves. He'd paid the Macedonian proprietor the full fee of shekels and quickly left, dressing as he stumbled for the door. Recouping in a nearby coffee bar, he rebuilt his sobriety with cup after frothy cup of Turkish kahve.

As the sun set, Uri strolled Balıkpazarı's night bazaar and idly observed the crowd's ebb and flow. Leaning against a wall, Uri watched a street

artist paint the market bustle. Sold for a few shekels, the painter wasn't particularly talented but Uri was enthralled. He lit a cigarillo and watched the flurry of brush on canvas. It had been ages since he had seen anyone create anything.

When he got back to the flat, Miriam's door was locked. After their trip to Maslak, she'd said little. Uri wanted to apologize, but she hadn't given him the chance. Whatever haunted her ran deeper and darker than an off-putting gesture. He tried not to take it personally.

In the study, he set down his falafel takeout and plopped into the terminal's articulated chair. Finished with the report, he incorporated Popov's technical dossier with his own Illithium findings, including a quick summary of his abortive jaunt to the bordello. Like clockwork, Popov's data package arrived on time. Uri had miscalculated the polymer poison dosage; the amount injected into the Morosov scientist was only enough to induce a mild headache. In hindsight, Uri realized a few ccs of saline would've provoked the same result.

The wavelet algorithm took time, and Miriam's microprocessor was as slow as most resurrected technology. Silicon IC design was no longer one of humanity's priorities. According to the terminal's clock, the compression would take an hour, then he'd have to wait for a transfer over to his console and upload to Al Fadah Madinah.

Uri thumbed the silver tea bar, feeling the foil texture as he admired the Sanskrit calligraphy. Its time and the date were spot on—there was not doubt—but he didn't have the mettle for another dance with the past. It was five years ago, the events of the day burned into his neural pathways like muscle memory: every pawn taken, every move

recorded. Uri never played chess again after that game.

"Goddamn you, Sava. Why, huh?" Uri whispered.

Lieutenant Sava Valis, the dealer of nightmares, a merchant of death, he was the one behind the Illithium, the "side job" he had mentioned years ago. Tangled up with Morosov, his Alkonost deployment provided a convenient vector for his stygian scavenging, each brutal act transcribed into binary alpha-waves for playback. Uri desperately wanted to be wrong about Sava. But years later, coincidence and recall dissolved any self-delusion.

The dying Earth was short on surprises, long on letdowns. Morality was causal, convenient when necessary, and constantly evolving—or devolving—as civilization receded. In its wake, amorality filled the survival vacuum, base instincts hardened, built to endure, adapt, and overcome. Evil was fabrication. And as much as Uri tried, he found it hard to blame Sava. Alkonost had let them all down.

But Uri found it painful to be so cynical, especially with regard to a man who had once saved his life.

He stood and propped open one of the dormer windows. He lit a cigarillo and leaned against the sill. A hard monsoon was falling, the city's canopy filled with the soothing flicker-noise of raindrops. Closing his eyes, he puffed the tobacco. Uri enjoyed Miriam's loft, despite his aversions to Constantinople's claustrophobia. It felt safe and he no longer felt the need to sleep with his pistol. Warm and inviting, the flat was in contrast to Miriam herself.

The bar flashed green on the terminal, the algorithm complete. Uri moved the Illithium data package over to his console and extended its high-gain aperture to transmit. The signal was poor, but with a little boost from the battery, upload wouldn't take long. He set the handheld device on a sofa arm near the window and went to take a shower in the study's adjoining toilet.

When he got out, he noticed Miriam's door slightly ajar. He toweled himself damp and threw on his trousers and tank top. Through the crack he heard the porcelain clink of a plate, the running of a faucet, and the metal shuffle of cutlery. After a minute, he quietly went about his business, making a conscientious decision to avoid the peculiar interruption. Hungry, he went for the greasy wrapping of his falafel and kababs, but noticed his meal was missing.

"I took the liberty of putting it on a plate for you," Miriam said from the doorway. "It's more civilized. Would you like something to drink?"

She disappeared back through the door. Uri followed. Miriam had never invited him "over" before, a gesture he didn't take lightly. Similar to the study, Miriam's flat was a single large room partitioned into a domicile. Simple amenities spoke of a minimalist Far East sensibility. Across from her futon, above a simple dining table, was an abstract painting dominating the room's far wall, a Roman galley, Uri gathered, striped with oars and rigging.

"Have a seat," Miriam said, gesturing to the table. "Eat."

Uri sat down and started in as Miriam prepared a pot of tea at the kitchenette. She looked exhausted. Her hair was tied back and tousled, a

few strands falling into insomnia-bloodshot eyes. She was wearing a set of wrinkled kurta pajamas. Uri got the impression she hadn't changed all day.

"This painting," Uri said, mouth half full of lamb and flatbread. "It's interesting. I like it."

"Watercolor and ink. I purchased it from a destitute dealer down on Istiklal Avenue. It's supposed to be a dromon warship from Old Byzantium, sixth or seventh century A.D.—at least that's what he told me," she said, pouring Uri a cup of black Rize tea.

"Is it because you're a sailor?"

"Maybe." Miriam shrugged, sitting down across from him. "A few years ago, I sailed a diving crew out to Sinop, on the north coast. Norsk-StatOil sponsored the expedition, a survey of the Black Sea's Mesopelagic methane. Five hundred feet down, past the anoxic layer, the divers discovered a sunken dromon in the silt. Perfectly preserved from the oxygen depletion, its wood deck and hull were intact."

Uri kept eating, his attention focused on Miriam. Despite her glumness and disheveled appearance, she was hauntingly beautiful.

"Back in those days, there used to be severe storms in the southern Black Sea before the prevailing currents shut down and the salinity spiked. The ship was probably inundated by the waves. It sank perfectly upright, the sea floor's ooze reforming its waterline."

She poured herself a cup of the Rize. "Back up on deck, I was glued to the camera monitors, captivated. Even the mast was upright, its ripped canvas sail flapping in current. Bones were everywhere."

"The crew?"

"Slaves. I saw the shackles still clinging to their leg bones. I couldn't stop thinking about it. So, when I saw this," she said, motioning to the painting, "I had to have it."

"Millennia, eh? It will probably be there longer than civilization itself at the rate things are going."

"I like to imagine that if you raised it to the surface, dried it out, maybe added some new rigging, it might sail again. It gives me hope. I don't know why. It just does."

Uri wasn't sure what she was getting at, but he nodded anyway. The room filled with an uncomfortable silence as he mopped up tahina sauce with a piece of pita, sipping tea in between bites. He looked at her but her eyes were diverted, open and wide, staring at nothing.

"Miriam, I want to apologize for my behavior the other night in Maslak. I didn't mean to insinuate anything," Uri said awkwardly. "Especially about your past. I'm ignorant. Painful memories—we all have them, I know, and I was boorish. I'm sorry."

"I wasn't a slave," Miriam blurted.

"But your scar? Isn't it...?"

Miriam shook her head. "I wasn't a slave," she repeated.

"Okay," Uri yielded. "It's just... I've seen those scars before, beyond the frontier. It's a Kurdish brand."

"I don't want to talk about it," Miriam's voice was low and firm.

Uri let it go. Miriam opened up as much as she was capable for the moment. Whatever nightmare lay in her past was deeply private. He could respect that; everyone had ghosts. Those living out in "The Empty World" of the Shiekh's Khal Al Alam

coped with their ordeals uniquely, with some wounds forever unhealed.

"Our flight leaves out of the airfield at Ataturk first thing the day after tomorrow. I need to get a hold of Hafiz tomorrow so we can retrieve your payload from the cistern," Miriam said, getting up. "Are you packed, archivist?"

"I just need to get the weaponry sorted and charge my console." She'd reverted to the "archivist" quip.

"There's a hotplate next to the spectrometer on the bench. My console's already charged, so..." Miriam turned away. Busy at the sink, it was Uri's cue to vacate.

"Thanks for the tea," Uri said, closing the door behind him.

He checked his orbital console; the transmission was complete. He pulled out the thermo-voltaic charger from his kit. Just a cord attached to a paddle heat sink, it was designed to charge the battery using campfire coals or boiling water. But Miriam's appeared custom-made, specially equipped with its own receptacle.

Uri slid the paddle into the charger and watched the console's battery icon pulse. Checking his communiqués, he noticed an unread message received a few minutes prior. He decrypted the download and read it.

Agent Uri Vitko, we appreciate the thoroughness of your report. It's more than we expected and we will include the added gold in your next drop. Illithium, it seems, has many lives.

Having come across related technology during our recent procurements, we had a suspicion it was a Morosov derivative. But this confirms it. Like Egyptian pharaohs, we required Illithium's

mummification capability to make "pickleheads," as you described them. We in the sheikhdome had a suspicion this cancerous nano-technology originated from somewhere else. So on a rumor, we sent you out to recover the Thuggee's mask.

Morosov is downright genius when it comes to repackaging and adapting past failures, however nefarious. We look forward to your successful delivery. If you could keep our arrangement private, Sheikh Sayyid needn't be the wiser.

—Fawzi Al Azraq Hawat :: unknown #656-PIL-9W3 :: sent via Excelsior :: encryption clock 0.002 hrs::

"Fawzi?"

Sheikh Sayyid's jovial lackey Fawzi was responsible for Uri's commission. By hacking his sheikh's data channels, he was able to hijack archivists in the field for his own curious ends. And somehow, he was able to pay them for it. A smart kid, Uri knew there was a reason he had warmed to the chubby subversive when he met him.

One last look, he opened the mask's mahogany case and touched its weirdness. The relic was to remain at Miriam's flat, unbeknownst to her. Tucking it in between the leather-bound volumes of a bookcase, it looked indistinguishable from neighboring tomes.

#

He remembered the smell: mildewed canvas, leaky hydraulics, and the dirty burn of jet fuel; Uri had almost forgotten how strong it was. Attempting to sleep in flight was pointless, the stiff jump seats, turbulence, and roar of the Ivchenko turbofans made relaxing impossible. Behind the navigator's seat, they sat strapped in, facing the flight crew. Young kids, Alkonost was already short on veterans, a fact complicated by a few

failed campaigns on Nova Byzantium's northern frontier. As a deserter, Uri worried they might recognize him, but the boys were far too young. Most weren't even shaving when he'd quit.

One of the sergeants, a few years older than the rest, mentioned the Fall of Kharkov. Operation Allied Saint was a drawn-out campaign, a low-level conflict until rumor of imminent pullout spread. Uri turned up his headphones to eavesdrop. He'd heard only speculation, but no direct confirmation.

There'd been an uprising, rumors of extortion by Alkonost, and a local oblast insurgency. The boys mentioned a battalion killed in their barracks by a truck bomb—three hundred troops lost—resulting in an ensuing pogrom of revenge killings. The pullout—or retreat, depending on one's perspective—was ugly. Uri wanted to ask the puerile mercenaries if they had seen his daughter, but he had no proof she was there.

The jarring turbulence increased. Uri glanced at the navigator's LCD map and saw a storm cell of whirling red and orange on the weather radar. He noticed something odd.

"Jan Mayen's due north, but by our heading..." Uri stretched to get a better look. "We're nine thousand meters over Pristina, way west." Uri said quietly, nudging Miriam.

"Sayyid sent me a communiqué late last night. The City received an archivist's beacon near the Rhine Delta; the agent's three months overdue. I talked it over with Einar at Norsk-StatOil. He said they could negotiate to have Alkonost adjust our flight plan in order to pick him up," Miriam casually explained.

"You're joking?"

She flashed him a perturbed glance. "No."

Uri smiled in disbelief. "Why didn't Sayyid notify me? As the military specialist and designated agent, I'm the one responsible for this shipment."

"But I'm responsible for coordinating our plans with the flight crew," Miriam retorted. "I set up this operation."

"Where're we going to land, Miriam? Flanders is a swamp, and what about dead zones?"

"This Antonov's equipped with rocket assist for short takeoff. The lost agent established a location for a suitable runway. It will be a quick stop; we'll be on the ground less than fifteen minutes. If he's not there, I've given orders to the crew to abort," Miriam explained.

"You've given orders?" Uri quipped. "And why wasn't I informed? We're not just day-tripping, here?"

Miriam stared straight ahead.

"Since I'm obviously not capable of doing the job, you want my payout as well?" Uri fumed.

He was irate with Sayyid; the sheikh had done this for a reason. Sure, it all paid the same, but he was the archivist assigned to this delivery, not Miriam. It was a slap in the face from Sayyid; it had to be punishment for his recent roguishness.

To escape the awkward silence, Uri got up and walked back to the payload bay. A line of crates draped with nets sat on wheeled trolleys. Near the front was his pallet, the nuclear duffel neatly bundled next to his weapons pack and the Norsk weather station. He lifted up the netting and peeked at the freight. The shipping labels revealed little: supplies any remote construction

crew might require, generators, hydraulics, compressors, air tools. But one of the small crates caught his attention.

Impact-proof, its hard case was latched with combination locks. The label indicated it held medical incubators and specimen holders complete with a built-in Ferrofluid cooling system; high-end hardware, definitely out of place.

"Fasten your harnesses, please," announced the pilot. "Rough air ahead."

Uri scrambled back, fell into his seat, and clipped the five-point buckle. The red twelve-volts flashed as the fuselage shuddered, the bumps silencing the crew. Leaden clouds whirled past a hatch window. They had entered the storm, a tropical depression. Central Europe, especially the massifs, was an unending cauldron of colliding storm fronts. Alkonost typically avoided such monstrous disturbances, but they were short on fuel and required a more direct route.

Uri tapped the knee of the mercenary sitting across from him. "Do we know the oxygen levels at the landing sight?"

The mercenary shrugged. "Not sure. I guess we'll know we get there, eh?"

Stupefied, Uri pulled his hood out from his satchel and prepped the filter and seals, adding extra combat fasteners to the canvas shroud.

Two hours later, jostled and motion sick, the crew prepared to land. The vertiginous descent was steep, the Antonov banking hard as it squared itself. Yellow cabin lights marked three thousand meters. Uri craned his neck to glance out the hatch window but saw only miasma.

The Rhine Delta was an upended chunk of the continent, a mean slog for any archivist. The

Flemish Low Countries were immersed by the rising North Sea, the dikes ruined, the land reclaimed by estuary. Now a vast slough, crocodile and water snake roamed the skeletal conurbations preying on lethargic nutria. Prone to methane flashovers, the Delta's fluvial jungles were optimal for birds and reptiles but hell on mammals, a true terra morta.

Through the mist a weedy tarmac appeared, a runway for an old military base outside Rotterdam's ruins. The turbofans struggled and strained the last one hundred meters until the landing gear careened into broken pavement. Uri's teeth smacked and pinched his tongue. Tailbones and backsides bruised, the crew groaned. With the spoiler brakes deployed, the Antonov creaked to a halt.

Miriam and Uri followed the security team as they un-buckled and moved to the rear cargo door. The sergeant pulled a hydraulic lever to lower the plane's drawbridge ramp. Everyone's breathing quickened. Uri checked his console. Atmospheric oxygen content was adequate, but carbon dioxide levels were in the red. He threw on his hood, cinched it up, and adjusted the filters. Miriam did the same as the younger Alkonost fumbled ineptly. Uri's fatigues clung to his skin. The Flemish swamp heat was atrocious.

They stepped onto the moldered airstrip and looked around. Cordoned in by moss-draped cypress and bushy cycads, the runway was infiltrated by bog plants. Ghostly hangars sat back from the claustrophobic forest, their gaping doors like empty eye sockets. Next to the structures, the ruins of a control tower tottered vine-entangled and stripped. A kick to the tarmac and the concrete crumbled to gravel.

"We're lucky we didn't crash."

The extremely loud sound produced by cicadas' tymbals saturated the air with insect noise. This place, with its deafening din and asphyxiating humidity, was misery. Uri grew anxious.

"Where is this bastard? We need to get the hell out of here," Uri said, his voice muffled by the hood muzzle.

"Fifteen minutes," Miriam said.

"I've never been out this far," said a specialist, pacing about.

"I was stationed in East Anglia for a few months," another mentioned. "But nothing like this."

Ten minutes ticked down. They continued to loiter.

"That's it," Uri said to the sergeant. "Have the crew start the engines. We're getting out of here."

"Sorry, sir, but I only take orders from authorized personnel," the sergeant argued. "We're not going anywhere until—"

A crossbow bolt, its aluminum shaft fletched with plastic, pierced the man's trachea right above the collarbone. The sergeant tore his hood off. Eyes bulging, he mouthed silent words but made only a wet gurgling. Dropping to a crouch, he reached up as if to catch the blood flowing from his neck. A moment later, he was dead.

"Christ!"

"The sarge!"

"Goddamn it!"

"Where did it come from?"

"It's a trap!" Uri exclaimed. "Get back in the plane."

Another bolt struck a recruit through the calf. Uri shouldered the screaming man as he toppled. Miriam and the others rushed into the waiting Antonov, the mercenaries slowing to drag the body inside. A squall of metal, tings of crossbow fire rained over the fuselage, a few penetrating the metal skin.

"Miriam!" Uri pointed forward. "Get them going!"

She nodded and scrambled up through the plane to the cockpit. As the pilots fired up the turbofans and swung the plane about, an explosion rocked the starboard. The Antonov listed, unmooring the trolley casters from the decking. A jet burst of acceleration sent the crate train backward and onto the ramp as it struggled to close. With a hydraulic groan, the door gave way to the momentum like a battering ram, spilling an archipelago of pallets onto the runway.

"We're hit!"

"Where?"

"The wing. Maybe an RPG."

"It's catching fire."

A jarring secondary rang the plane. Uri tossed Miriam her weapon then grabbed his Kyber rifle, Zigana pistol, and kit as he dashed back onto the tarmac. Using the scattered cargo for cover, they hunkered down and loaded clips. Uri looked at the four young men and the navigator. In their haste, only half had brought their weapons.

"Did the pilots get out?"

"I don't know. They were unbuckling when I bailed," the navigator said. "By the looks of it... probably not."

"How're we going to get out of here? We're a thousand klicks from nowhere," yelled a panicked recruit.

"We're fucked!" shouted another.

Uri grew annoyed.

The Antonov's left wing was engulfed, igniting the short take-off rocket pods. Another plangent explosion and the wing cracked open, expelling lit fuel. It didn't take long. A minute later and the airframe was a mushroom of black smoke and billowing flame.

Miriam pulled out her sniper rifle and assembled the barrel and stock. Frustrated, Uri threw his Zigana and extra clips at the weaponless recruits, warning them to fire sparingly. More crossbow bolts mixed with arrows thumped the crate plywood. Popping up, he used the freight pallet as a parapet and scoped the scene.

Near the wreckage he saw a line of sinewy lanky men wearing breathing apparatuses, not hoods, but medical masks with a tube connected to an oxygen reservoir. The barbarians were shirtless, bodies streaked with orange war paint. Uri opened up with his Kyber bullpup and emptied a clip in three-round bursts. The barbarians scattered as he cut them down. Another barrage of muscle-powered missiles poured in as he ducked.

"They're primitives, no firearms."

"How many?" Miriam asked.

Uri shrugged. "I don't know. Hard to tell. A fucking lot, though."

Miriam unfolded her rifle's bipod and propped it on the crate to scan the airfield as Uri laid down suppressing fire. The Alkonost recruits covered for them. Spraying and praying, their wild shooting exasperated Uri. Through the smoke, he saw movement, swarms of Rhine barbarians creeping in on their position like ants to sugar.

"There's hundreds of them," Miriam said.

Uri glanced at his duffel lying on the tarmac. The tote was too heavy. He couldn't run with it, his adversaries too nimble. Unlike his hood—which acted as a bellows to concentrate oxygen—the barbarians had fashioned a pure oxygen turbo-boost. The devices were a clever way to overcome a dead zone's lassitude.

"Called reloads, got it?"

Miriam nodded.

He switched the Khyber to single shot and fired, the brass tumbling from the breach in a steady ka-ching ka-ching. Miriam's aim was tighter, every shot dropping a warrior mid-stride. An odd hit breached a barbarian's oxygen tank, producing a blue flash like a firefly. Minutes passed. The first wave had succumbed to Uri and Miriam's fusillade. Not far behind, a second wave rushed in to fill the fallen ranks.

"Reload!" Miriam dropped down and slapped in another clip.

Uri, with six clips emptied and two left, was thin on ammunition. Perspiration misted his eye shield, challenging his aim. With the enemy only a few hundred yards away, he switched to three round bursts.

"Almost out!" Miriam cried.

Uri glanced over and saw a single clip left in her webbing. To his right, a burst of wild pistol fire subdued a flanking group of barbarians; the Alkonost initiates had finally landed a hit.

But it wasn't enough.

After emptying another clip, Uri's heart sank. In less than a minute, they'd be overrun. He reached down to his calf, pulled the Grozny beheading blade from its sheath, and ejected its two cyanide doses.

"Cease fire!" Uri yelled. "That's it, we're done!" He looked over his shoulder at the depleted mercenaries, weapons exhausted. Only three out of the five remained, the dead skewered by metal.

"I can't do this." Miriam set down her rifle.

Uri looked at her, despondent eyes teary behind the enrichment hood's eye shield.

"I won't let them have me—I can't."

"Miriam, look at me." Uri flashed the two vials of black liquid, pushing one into her fist. "If it comes down to that... this will take care of it, got it?"

She nodded.

Uri knelt next to her. "But stay alive, okay? Just do me that favor."

He held out his hand. She gripped it tight.

The warrior whoops swamped the insect cacophony as they closed in, bows and crossbows taut and aimed. In the dusky light, they were alien creatures direct from a child's nightmare. A war chief, ornamented with a chest harness and reptile skin epaulettes, broke through the phalanx. In his hand was an archivist's battered and soiled console. The chief approached Uri and poked him in the chest with his assegai spear.

"You have one too, eh?" the man said in broken Latin.

[NB] CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

November 2156 C.E.

"You expect me to give in to the demands of pederasts and fairies?" exclaimed Padshah Kahn. "You're all fools. I will not shame myself before that ... that army of dandies. I won't!"

General Dobish, commander of Operation Alexander, shook his head and stroked his mustache. "It's unconventional, I'll give it that. I've heard of crazier things in my thirty-year career. But..."

"But... what?" said the gesticulating Kahn, his shaggy papaha wobbling on his round head.

"Lieutenant Uri Vitko?" Dobish turned to face the lieutenant. "Are you up for this? What's your intramurals rating?"

Uri took a puff of his cigarillo and shook his head. He was having trouble believing what he was hearing, especially from a general.

"You're actually contemplating this?" the Kahn interjected, bewildered. "General, I demand that you cease entertaining such nonsense."

"You will demand nothing," General Dobish replied, shoving his finger at the thickset warlord. "You're not footing the bill for this, your imperial sponsors back in Constantinople are, and if it wasn't for us, those cross-dressing pixies would have had your head on a pike years ago."

"It was hovering around twenty-two hundred last time I checked, sir," Uri answered belatedly. "But there are some Alkonost veteran masters who—"

"There's no time, lieutenant," the general started. "So, you think you can beat these Nizari bastards?"

"I don't know. Maybe, sir," Uri remained noncommittal.

"It's worth a shot, eh?" the general smirked.

Uri shrugged, slowly exhaling smoke.

"So what are the terms of the ceasefire, Lieutenant Valis?" Dobish asked, spinning around on his boot heels. "What do les jumeaux terribles have lined up?"

Sava walked into the center of the quorum with Jaweed and opened a loose-leaf binder listing The Brothers' ceasefire terms. The Padshah and his hoary lieutenants gasped in huffs of indignation as he read aloud. Lines redrawn, ground and oil facilities turned over, access to desalination facilities and corridors inland...

Despite the protests, Uri didn't find The Brothers' desires all that unreasonable. For Nizari fanatics, the pair possessed uncanny business minds.

"So we'll draw fifteen lots for the Khan's men, as Sava's already committed to be 'king' in this contest. Correct, Sava?" Sava nodded. The general opened the notebook and gave it a cursory glance. "And Uri will be our master... unless the Kahn has a champion he'd like to offer."

Uri had expected Dobish, one of Alkonost's more conservative generals, to oppose the plan. But much to Uri's dismay, Alkonost, ever more concerned with blood and treasure, viewed gladiatorial chess as a means to an end. In the creosote dust of Turkmenbashi, "paths of glory" were quickly transmuting into "paths of least resistance."

Uri felt his intestines knot. Eyes downcast, he focused on the scuffed leather of his jump boots. His throat longed for a shot of Scotch.

"You want me to sacrifice my men? You make these decisions as if I'm not here, general?" The Khan's face was frozen in an incredulous grimace. "Who do you think you are, that you can just enter my palace and make these insane demands, eh?"

"I'm your last chance. You're outnumbered and outgunned, Kahn," Dobish answered curtly, walking over to the expansive window of the retrofitted petroleum ministry. "That nomad army out there—hell, it's like they're sprouting from the sand, isn't it? I suggest you draw your terms. Let's see what we can get out of these garish gynandries, eh?" he pointed at Jaweed.

Uri headed downstairs to the anteroom to get his drink. No one stopped him. The Kahn had converted the old oil ministry into a palace, perched on a wind-burnt mountain that overlooked Turkmenbashi's Awaza peninsula. Scotch was extinct this far east, so a manservant delivered him a shot of vodka. He slumped into a lounge in front of the tall windows and lit a cigarillo.

A lightning storm raged over the Caspian's gray, purple forks mingling with the war zone's artillery bursts. Although exhausted, his mind buzzed. Conjuring the ghosts of Lopez, Kasparov, Spassky, and Carrera he stepped through openings, a sixty-four square grid materializing in his mental ether. A middle-game checkmate... only if his opponent was inexperienced, not likely. What gambit? What defense? Queen's side opening or a king's side...

He needed another drink.

"Why did you run out?" Sava asked, stepping in between Uri and the glass.

Uri shook his head. "Those Carpi barbarians really got to you, didn't they, Sava?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I think you know. Did I-and-I do a work up on you before we deployed? If not, they should have," Uri exhaled a dark plume. "This whole thing is deranged, the twisted notion of a sick mind. "

"You've got me wrong, Uri. I didn't come up with the idea for this chess match, it was those Nizari lilies. Anyway, it'll be my ass if you fuck up, right?"

Uri shook his head. "That's all I goddamned need, another guilt trip."

"Well, the general's onboard with it. Strangely. It's a go."

"Dobish? Some one's been slipping amobarbital into that guy's kahve."

"Anyway, it's a way for Alkonost to get out of this shit for cheap," Sava argued. "So, we lose sixteen men. Back where we started."

"And concede to the terms of the ceasefire."

"If we lose, I think we have to keep Padshah Kahn in his place, sure. The Brothers might make better proxies anyhow. As long as the oil flows, Constantinople will be happy."

"Listen, Sava," Uri said, getting up to look him in the eye. He'd removed his chrome vampire fangs. "I'm sure it's no secret that I've been suspicious of you since Moldova. The fact is, I don't trust you, and I don't get why you trust me."

"It was me," Sava declared, unapologetic. "I dumped those drooling cataleptics in the woods. If that's what you're getting at."

"Why?" Uri asked, mouth agape.

"You know why, Uri."

"Revenge?"

"Partially, but it was more of a warning. I wanted to scare those spooky Carpi fuckers."

"It wouldn't have helped."

"It might have, but you didn't give it a chance," Sava said, leaning against the window. "Those Neanderthals—all these goddamned barbarians—they only understand one thing... fear, instinctual, elemental, and animalistic. And I was going to put that fear into those superstitious bastards by damn."

Uri looked away, unnerved. His mind raced to form an argument, but his brain blanked. He opened his mouth but lacked the words to fill it. Finally, he muttered, "I don't agree. I think you're wrong, but—"

Sava said nothing, eyebrows raised, patiently waiting for Uri to finish his thought.

"—but I appreciate your honesty."

"If you want to send a dispatch to I-and-I and report me, no bother; I don't mind. I just recommend you do it after the match," Sava offered, with exaggerated politeness.

"No. Forget it," Uri replied.

Sava's brazenness was stupefying. He wanted to punch the grinning fool, but couldn't. Sava's insanity was infectious.

"How quickly have you mated an opponent?"

"I don't remember. Depends on the player, I guess."

"Gentlemen!" General Dobish interrupted, descending the anteroom's spiral staircase with his contingent of the upper echelon.

"Sir!" Both shouted, saluting.

"At ease," Dobish said, walking up to the men. "Listen, in order to get Padshah Kahn to buy into this, I offered up the back rank."

"I don't understand, sir," Uri said.

"We're going to draw lots from the six battalions, one battalion will have to choose two. Now, as I understand it, rooks, knights, bishops... they're less likely to get popped," he said pointing to his temple gun-like. "So..."

"Sir, I don't think I can go through with this," Uri pleaded. "Sava and I... We have an understanding, but other Alkonost comrades? It'll influence the match. I can't guarantee their lives."

"Believe me, lieutenant, it pains me as much as it does you to sacrifice a good merc for something so sideways. But it's either this, or we loose a few companies fighting those pubescent zealots house-to-house."

"Sir, what if we do lose? What's the contingency plan?" Sava asked.

"I'm not really sure why you give a shit, Lieutenant Valis. You'll be greased all over the checkerboard," General Dobish grimaced. "But to answer the question, I've received orders from Command. We're to cordon off the oil terminal and pipelines to the north of Turkmenbashi as a fallback. Heavy assault is finally rolling onto the beach from Baku. So we'll be reinforced. The oil must flow. Understand?"

"Yes sir."

"All right. We're in radio communication with The Brothers Farzad and Farzam. The match will be in three days. Until then, gentlemen." General Dobish saluted.

Uri and Sava saluted back as Dobish and his entourage left.

"I best get in some target practice."

"What's the penalty if you miss a shot?" Uri asked. "If you miss a 'piece'?"

"I never bothered to ask. I guess we'll find out," Sava said, walking away.

Uri flagged down the manservant and ordered another vodka shot. Sitting down in one of the sofa loungers, he watched the city's anarchy below him. An image stuck in his mind: hooded Death playing chess with a crusader knight surrounded by a plague's dance macabre. He rapped his knuckles on the suede armrest trying to remember how he knew it, a film, a painting... both?

It didn't matter. Humanity's beliefs lay in the merging of the literal and the figurative. Coincidence, self-fulfilling prophecy... it was all the same. Whether a pale horse molded from storm clouds, or a deadly chess match played with living pieces. Signs and symbols were fabrications, constructs of the primitive and fearful human mind. But sometimes reason's candle flickered and it scared the hell out of him.

#

Padshah Khan insisted his men carry their warlord's standard. So as not to be outdone, Sava volunteered to carry the Second Brigade's Flag, Alkonost's winged maiden on black. Like condemned souls walking through the City of Dis, the seventeen men wound their way through the Awaza District's narrow streets.

The Turkmen Hotel lay deep in Nizari territory and The Brothers were adamant no show-of-force accompany the players. Sava, the king rifleman, was the only one allowed his Vepr firearm.

Shirtless, the men were covered with powdered black coke adhered to their bodies with slippery tar. They flipped a coin, and Uri had won. He preferred black, openings and gambits too full of indecision.

He played the Khan's men to prove his skill. Most were beginners and lacked the knowledge of basic openings. Simple mistakes and poor strategy, Uri mated them all in the middle games. General Dobish recommended the matches as way to calm Padshah Khan, insuring the warlord that he was in Alkonost's capable hands. So Uri obliged, but was grimly disappointed to not be relieved of his duty.

Forced to wear samurai-like banners, a flag holster identified each man: knights, bishops, rooks, queen... everyone but the pawns. Heads low, the men realized this was a march to a firing line, a death sentence offset by slim chance. Uri avoided looking his comrades in the eyes, the anxious guilt wetting his palms with shame.

Sava however, was reveling like a carnival clown. Complete with vampire fangs, he taunted the crowd along the route, hissing and mocking Awaza's scrawny children and their hijab-shrouded mothers. Adding theater to his harlequin guise, he smeared away the petrol goop from his back to expose his bat-winged tattoo.

"This isn't a funeral, lieutenant," Sava said. "You're letting them get to you."

"You're goddamned right it isn't a funeral, it's a fucking execution," Uri said, eyeing Sava's getup. "And this whole wretched parade... it isn't helping, Sava. Those men here—our comrades—are going to die today. You're mocking them," he said,

pointing to the men. "And I'm not going to be able to stop it."

"You're going to give it your best, right? They know you will."

"Do they?"

Uri trailed back and let Sava conduct his show. Full of hatred for the barbarians, Sava was eager to slay them. His performance was all part of a death ritual. The Brothers' followers scattered as he worked his way to the front. Like a demon from medieval lore, the metal fangs and raven flesh taunted their credulous minds.

The hotel's two towers dwarfed the shambling overcrowded slums. The parade passed under Grand Turkmen's portico, a once grandiose archway. The marbled columns were pocked with strafing and stained from smoke. A tattered banner splashed in Russian Cyrillic script read: Welcome to "The Great Game."

Inside the portico, heckles and jeers greeted the seventeen players from the towers' broken balconies and decks. Like bees on honeycomb, the nomads clung to the buildings' vertical spaces. In the center was the epic chessboard, empty except for a rounded-back oldster sweeping away the Karakum dust.

"Good luck," Sava said, shaking Uri's hand. "We'll do a radio check before the clock start, okay?"

"Got it," Uri said tapping his earpiece. "Aim for the head, be merciful."

"I always am." Sava winked.

Uri limply saluted as the men marched onto to the board.

Each square was five meters, forty-by-forty meters total, the playing surface roughly half a

football pitch. For Sava, rifle range would be adequate for precision headshots—Alkonost sniper training mandated one hundred meters minimum—but there was an added challenge.

Uri watched as the back rank strapped on stilts, treaded aluminum struts like those used for ceiling work. It was a precondition of the game; the Brothers demanded maximum spectacle. A meter above the checkering, “King” Sava towered over the other pieces. The idea of firing a high-powered rifle from wobbly stilts was bizarre, and no one knew the penalty for missed shots.

A cadre of older Turkmen escorted Uri to the balcony of the hotel’s dilapidated reception. The gallery was retrofitted into box seats with the player’s table in the center. Decrepit Ottoman furniture lay scattered about. The bleached red velvet divans and settees smelled of mold and dry rot.

Uri greeted his opponents. The androgynous brothers were dressed as Rajastani Maharajas, their version of full military dress. Uri felt the warped draw of their flamboyant personality cult.

“We are pleased to make your acquaintance, Alkonost man. May we offer you chai, coffee, cigarettes?”

“No... no thank you,” Uri replied.

Uri looked around. Past the blocky shapes of The Brothers’ thick-necked strongmen, Uri saw a handful of Padshah Khan’s lieutenants accompanied by Alkonost from mission intelligence. Mach, Sava’s specialist, was setting up a tripod near the balcony, mounting a device that looked like a live-cam or a targeting sensor.

“Our players will be arriving shortly,” said Farzad or Farzam.

"Which one of you...?" Uri said, his finger wagging from one to the other.

"Will be your opponent? My brother Farzad here is extremely competitive...

"...but my win rate is forty-nine point four percent to Farzad's fifty point six. Sometimes I get too anxious and my passions overwhelm," he giggled.

Cheers filled the courtyard as The Brothers' players marched onto the board. Powdered with white talc, they resembled kabuki actors, complete with red-and-black makeup, a compliment to the Naziri nomad's devotion to their preferred androgyny. The pawns were boys, maybe twelve or thirteen years old; older adolescents filled the back ranks. High on crystal amphetamine, their eyes fluttered, trance-like.

"Children?" Uri scowled at The Brothers. "We did not agree to this."

"They're not children, Alkonost man, they are fierce mujahideen!"

Uri shook his head in disgust.

A loudspeaker announced the start of the game. Facing the reception lobby, two jury-rigged football timers converted into chess clocks, controlled by remote plungers, hung from the tower opposite. At ninety minutes per side, the match would be standard tournament length. Uri struggled to orient himself to the board. The vantage was off. Lacking the convention of a standard chess set, precious time would be consumed plotting moves.

"Please, sit," Farzad motioned to black's gilded armchair. "Let us begin. And remember, when pieces are taken, the king will call the move afterward, not before."

"Understood." Uri tapped his headset mike.
"Radio check, Sava, you there?"

"Roger that." Sava gave a thumbs-up from across the board.

Sava and Jaweed aimed their rifles skyward and fired. Farzad's time started. He whispered his first move into his handheld. Jaweed relayed the move to his man with a shout. Pawn to e4, a conventional kingside opening. Everyone watched as a boy-pawn shuffled two spaces forward into the center. Farzad pushed the clock.

"All right Sava, let's respond with pawn to e5."

"Roger that."

Sava yelled the move to the pawn below. Uri promptly smacked the plunger and started Farzad's clock ticking. The game developed into a classic four knights opening. The first set of moves was a conservative centuries-old strategy. It built a bulwark in the center, and with the introduction of the "Spanish variation," the piece development gravitated into its natural flow.

"They're playing it safe. Giving me some breathing room."

On the fifth move, Farzad castled Jaweed. The Naziri Turkmen shuffling two spaces to his right to fortify behind his pawn wall and rook. Uri responded in kind, forcing Sava to castle and stilt-shuffle to his left. More piece development complicated the center as both sides jockeyed for diagonal control with their bishops.

"Get on with it, lieutenant. Goddammit. Let's get this shit going," Sava radioed, agitated.

"In a minute."

By the fourteenth move, a piece had yet to be taken. Uri noticed a visible shake to the stilted players, the jittery nerves of impending doom. The

dimming skies expelled a sand-filled zephyr that eddied and whirled through the courtyard. The piece banners whipped, threatening to topple the smaller players.

"Get ready, Sava."

"Roger."

"Pawn takes e4," Uri radioed.

The pawn from the opening move, the boy only fifteen meters from Sava, was strung out and oblivious. Raising his rifle to the crook of his shoulder, Sava struggled against the wind. Uri shut his eyes and waited for the report. A few painful seconds later and he heard a gunshot.

"Got him in the neck. Dead though," Sava radioed. "It's about time."

Crowd noises swamped Sava's voice over the microphone. The boy was on his knees, blood-soaked hands grasping his neck, the blood pulsing through his fingers. Once he fell, the clocks stopped and a pair of grim-faced women in chadors shuffled out to haul the corpse away, leaving a coxcomb swath across the checkers.

"Messy, but a hit nonetheless," Farzam said, idly loitering behind his brother.

The clock was restarted and Farzad made his next move. Cantilevered in a contortionist's pose, Jaweed aimed his rifle and lifted a stilted leg for balance. The shot spun him a bit, but Uri's pawn, one of Padshah's men, quickly dropped.

"Bishop takes pawn!" he yelled.

The middle game was unfolding. The next three moves were vicious, with each player reducing their piece count by three. Uri's knight had gone down, quickly and cleanly, an Alkonost recruit from the Third Rifles Brigade. He didn't know the

man, but it didn't matter; the anguish and remorse was just as sharp.

"That fucker owed me money," Sava quipped.

"Quiet! Respect, Goddamnit," Uri was not amused.

After the initial bloodletting, Uri developed his queenside pawn structure; subtle pushes out into the center ranks to fortify the diagonals. After the twenty-third move with forty-five minutes down on his clock, the king's file had opened into an alleyway. Like a blitzkrieg, Farzad took Uri's bishop with his rook a few spaces from Sava. Uri quickly executed the infiltrated piece, the body falling into an awkward slump.

"Odd sacrifice. What's he doing?"

"What's that?" Sava shouted through the radio static.

"He's trying to open up the board. Get ready."

"Roger."

They jockeyed for position, the remaining rooks pulling kingside to shore their defenses. On the twenty-eighth move, Uri ordered Sava to take a knight on the third rank, almost twenty-five meters away. A bluster whipped Sava's standards, the flags' vibration jerking his shoulder and barrel arm. Precious seconds were wasted as Uri waited.

Vortices of dust danced through the courtyard and across the board. Grit-caked, Sava rubbed the sand from his eyes and squinted into the sight. He squeezed the trigger. The shot went amiss, tagging the Farzas' knight in the calf. The faltering man exploded in a high-pitch yowl as he reached for his leg.

"Goddamnit," Uri hollered. "Finish him!"

"I'm trying!"

Another round smacked the man's shoulder; he was writhing too much to get a bead. The courtyard hushed with his wailing. Frustrated, Sava switched to a three-round burst and put a sloppy end to his misery.

Uri's stomach heaved as he dribbled out a bubble of vomit. The showy Brothers snickered and pointed like bully school children. Uri's sanity listed amid the atrocity pouring in from breached bulkheads—an abyss... a panic. He hit the plunger, stood abruptly, and turned to walk away.

"Five minutes!" The loudspeaker roared.

To his horror, the umpires advanced his clock. Missed shots had a price, and a costly one. He walked off his malaise, sat back down, and tried to focus, sparking a cigarillo to calm his nerves. Uri suppressed his revulsion and tried to get on with it.

"Looks like you're going to have to hurry," Sava radioed.

"Hone your aim."

"I'm on meter-high stilts in a dust storm, lieutenant. This rifle's firing high-caliber rounds, I can't guarantee shit."

Uri and Farzad exchanged queens, another Alkonost killed. Jaweed was taking clean shots, benefiting from the lee of the western hotel tower. Luckily, most of the men seemed ignorant of chess play's subtle tactics, lessening the impending sense of doom. But a few were in the know. The whole perversion was an unfathomable horror. Uri tried to dissociate the reality from his actions; he had to get on with it. More pawn exchanges bloodied the queenside board, the black and white smeared with gore.

"The pace is picking up, eh?" Sava radioed.

"You're going to have to call the moves quicker."

Forty-five moves in, Farzad was left with a rook and a bishop along with a scattering of pawns. Uri's count was much the same, but he'd two rooks, linked and much stronger. As he prepared to move Sava into the center, one the Padshah's men, a lone pawn in the center, started to crack. Screaming in a gibberish of pidgin Turkmen, he threatened to run off. Unsure what to do, Sava cursed him.

"There is no clock stoppage for this," Farzam informed Uri, the flamboyant brother's usual gleeful whimsy turned dour. "If he runs, you forfeit!"

"Sava, you've got to calm that son-of-a-bitch down!"

"Or what?"

"Or you resign, and Jaweed—or whoever the hell—kills you where you stand, got it?"

"Got it."

Sava lowered his rifle and pulled the trigger, ripping open the thigh of the hysterical subaltern. Falling to his knees, the man balled his fists and begged the balcony for mercy. Sava peevishly wagged his forefinger; the message was crystalline.

One of Padshah's men got up from his settee enraged, and stomped over to Uri in protest. Uri tried to ignore the man's beard-spittle tantrum, but was overwhelmed by his bullying gesticulation. The fractious Turkmen made a grab for Uri but was stopped by one of The Brothers' cadre and pulled into the periphery.

"What's the ruckus?" Sava asked.

"One of the Khan's men is throwing a fit, a little annoyed by your draconian stratagem," Uri radioed. "Can he crawl at least?"

"He'll crawl, by damn."

More bodies slapped the polished marble like butchered meat. An exchange left Farzad with a bishop and Uri with a lone rook. The rook—an Alkonost grenadier from Second Cavalry—relaxed on his shorter stilts. Having escaped the glut of sacrifice, his chest slowed to a steady rhythm. Uri was ten minutes ahead of Farzad, with twenty-five minutes to go. The endgame was afoot and speed was a necessity.

Less than a minute a move, the pieces stilted around the black-and-white tessellate in a cumbersome waltz. The slick of blood challenged balance, and with each move, Sava and the remaining Alkonost fought for equilibrium. A last pawn exchange cleaned the board, the heaps of black and white corpses—now gray and red—lay indiscriminately along the perimeter. With two opposing pawns isolated on the far kingside file, the four pieces battled on.

"How much longer? You have him, you just need to finish him off!" Sava barked.

"I'm trying."

"Fifteen minutes left!"

"I can see that."

Uri chased Farzad's bishop around the board until the eightieth move. Sava squatted on his stilts to line up the pawn shot. Ten minutes left. The shot was twenty-meters away, and Sava's fatigued legs trembled.

"Take your time." Uri bit down on the nub of his soggy cigarillo.

Sava said nothing.

The bullet penetrated the boy soldier's chest. A percolation of viscous purple dribbled down through the talc, raspberry syrup over powdered sugar. Sava screamed the move, but the pawn failed to drop. The 7.62mm round had entered and exited cleanly, its momentum preserved.

"Ah hmm," Farzam said. "That's going to hurt."

"Five minutes!" Farzad shouted.

"Wait!" Uri begged. "Give it more time."

The brother's shook their head in synchronicity; the deathblow had not been meted. In shock, the boy stood resilient. Uri watched helplessly as precious minutes vanished with the clock reset. Another annoyed Vepr burst brought the move to completion.

"Sorry, lieutenant. That kid should be dead."

"Forget it," Uri radioed. "Stay nimble."

Running on the aluminum stilts, Uri ordered the three remaining pieces around like a drill sergeant. Using his rook, he cordoned Jaweed down to the first rank. With two minutes remaining, and Farzam's bishop idle and impotent, Uri ordered the last sequence of moves.

"I've got him, Sava. Get ready."

"A pleasure."

Cornered, Jaweed's eyes widened. Gasps of shock and desperation filled the courtyard mixed with the jubilant shouts and laughter from the Khan's contingent. With one move to mate, Sava reloaded a clip and aimed the rifle at Jaweed. His chrome fang's glinted in the fading tangerine light.

"Rook to d4, finish him."

Sava's eagerness betrayed his restraint. Uri heard gunfire, muffled and distant. Pops and ricochets played along the balcony. So close, Uri felt the splinters of marble-chip ejecta. Sava

pulled away from Jaweed and surgically fired a volley into the hotel's aeries. A man yelled as he fell from a deck, his rifle and rag-doll body tumbling into a desiccated copse of palms.

"Snipers!" Sava yelled.

Sava unloaded into Jaweed's skull, dismantling bone, cartilage, and brain tissue from the Turkmen's thoracic, finishing the job. Uri stepped back under the terrace soffits but was garroted by the steroidal mass of a huge djinn-like nomad. Long knives with serrated edges lunged in, aimed for the gut. Uri fought off the assassins, kicking with a rabbit's frenzy.

"Mach, I'm going for Uri," Sava yelled over the ka-chunk, ka-chunk of stilted running.

Uri was bleeding, sticky wet heat drenching his side. He'd been stabbed. Losing strength and flailing, he squirmed to escape the thrall. Every breath was trauma as piano wire kinked his windpipe. He heard another semi-automatic burst when a crush of bodies piled onto him.

Sava, still attached to stilts, dove over the balcony to disrupt the assault.

The Brothers were gone, shuttled away by their cadre. Through blurry eyes, Uri struggled to orient himself. The Khan's men were dead, splayed over broken furniture, pulpy craters perforating their backs. Lying on his side, Sava unloaded his clip into the henchmen's twitchy bodies as Mach and two mission intelligence agents strafed a swarm of enraged nomads.

"Mach, I need a knife," Sava yelled.

The specialist reached down to his calf, pulled a survival blade from its sheath, and tossed it to Sava. Cutting away the nylon straps, he shook the stilts free. Uri craned his neck, looking for the

Alkonost rook; the man was nowhere, consumed by the mob.

"We've got to get him out of here!" Sava yelled to Mach. "He's losing blood."

"I've radioed the Second, there's a Hind inbound, a rooftop about half a klick to the northeast," Mach said, packing up the odd recording device from the tripod.

"Grab a tapestry and throw him on. We need to get him out of here."

Uri bounced along, his dead weight manhandled like a slaughtered pig. Sharp cracks of weapons fire mixed with the chanting hollers of the berserk. They were on the move, dragging him through Awaza's slum warrens. Dust and ash snowed down, coating the bloody pools on his abdomen.

For the last stretch, Mach and Sava grabbed his floppy extremities and lugged him up a darkened stairwell to a concrete roof. Some one popped a flare as the whoop of the Mi-24 gunship floated through the whirling sand.

"Almost there, lieutenant." Sava grinned boyishly, his fangs farcical.

Uri held onto Sava's hand with a death grip, unable to whisper a thank you. A puff from Mach's cigarette and four ccs of morphine ended the day.

"The brothers Farzad and Farzam never intended to lose, did they?" Mach shouted over the rotor din.

"No. It was just a fig leaf," Sava shouted back. "An easy way to get what they wanted. Keep Alkonost off their backs. The Khan was never going to get anything out of this, and neither were we."

"Then why?"

"Worth a shot." Sava shrugged. "You got it?"

"Yeah." Mach tapped his satchel, the black recording cartridge tucked inside.

[NB] CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

April 2164 C.E.

Skulls loomed in the seawater. Some were jawless, while a few were smaller, onion-sized, probably infants. He saw thousands of them, some barely human. Sava attempted to reach for the bony swarm but paralytic sloth hobbled him. A jungle of algae clouded the murk. The wispy brown fibers brushed his skin, the slimy texture causing an involuntary shiver.

A pale glow filtered down through littoral water, cold and leaden. He yelled but his lungs were drowned with saltwater. This was a punishment—he had a suspicion—a lynching staged by the fleshless aquatic mob.

Who were they? Their black sockets revealed no emotion, no spite, hate, loathing, ambivalence. The skulls were blank, a bare canvas. Regardless, these floating water spirits—these vodyanoy—had him in their aquatic embrace.

His body rippled with diseased veins. Gazing down, a tangle of metallic fibers bound his ankles together. A stalk of rust crawled up from the fathomless depths and anchored him to the abyss like a tree root. The encrusted mesh dug into his flesh. He felt no pain, only the unease of deadened capillaries crowded by a parasitic intrusion.

Sava tried to reason, to plead his case, but they'd muzzled him. His waterlogged larynx produced only porpoise-like squeals. Numb hands could not gesticulate. With no other means left,

he prayed to his vodyanoy captors in the psychic cant of their benthic tongue.

What do you want with me? he emoted, worried eyes bulging black.

"You are our guardian, our watchman," they replied, voices bubbly.

I guard nothing. I'm your prisoner. Who are you?

"We are the homunculi."

The what?

"The meek. The seed."

You're judging me—this is my punishment. You think I did this to you. I did not, Sava begged.

"It matters little," burbled the watery chorus. "What matters now, is that you remain with us, our eternal protector."

What are my crimes?

"In a lawless world, 'crime' lacks definition."

Sava felt a sharp sting in his mouth. He'd punctured his lip tonguing the sharpened steel of his canines and the metal-wire bridge that connected them. He tried unsuccessfully to spit out the metal teeth.

I'm not a monster.

Silence.

Release me... please.

The frayed rust column wiggled and constricted around his lower extremities. Like burrowing worms, threads of malleable metal punctured his bloated flesh. His movements had been sluggish, but now the infection ossified his ankles and knees, immobilizing the joints completely.

"We cannot. We're your children, your progeny, and you are desperately needed."

An encircling serpentine shape moved among the vodyanoy skulls. The dim light distorted it. A fin, a tail, a snout. Sava felt the leviathan yank

him from below. The skulls drew nearer. He shut his eyes and shivered as the slimy craniums caressed his skin.

Deeper still, he felt the cord snap and was free from his moorings. Lacking ballast, he drifted through the submerged horror. His mind was a cacophony of inaudible mumbling; they were arguing amongst themselves. A violent jerk from below, and his limp body floundered. A megalodon—his leviathan—had rammed into his useless feet clouding the water with milky gore. He felt no pain, only an anesthetic disassociation. The trauma buoyed him, the weighty flesh gone.

Sava ascended through the murk. The bony throngs fell away. The forest green of the lower depths gave way to vibrant purple, and with the haunted sea's improved visibility a shimmering surface materialized. Like an angel, he floated high above the osseous spheres. They stretched out to the edge of the sunken horizon, multitudes in the millions

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"Miserable bastard nightmares," Sava groaned, pulling himself onto a stiff elbow.

Like arthritis, the pain was crippling. He heard and felt the perforating rips, the sub-dermal welts bruising black. Rolling over, he tapped the bed lamp and pulled back the sheets. His skin looked gruesome under the full-spectrum halogen. Like synthetic leprosy, rigid tributaries linked blotchy provinces of contusion. His joints felt clogged with detritus like gears seized with rust. And every morning was worse.

"We're dying."

Sava swung his legs over the edge of the bed and felt a burst of pain as his knees bent. Gritting

his teeth, he let loose a high-pitched wail. He grabbed his field blade and whetstone then stumbled back to his bunk. Someone knocked on the door.

"Sava. You awake?"

"Barely," he replied, voice shaky. "Come in, Mach."

A thin wedge of gray light pierced the stuffy darkness. Mach rolled his wheelchair into the doorway's threshold. His rigid arms trembled with effort. He tried to look Sava in the eyes, but sweat-matted hair fell over his bloodshot eyes. Filthy and stained, his thin medical pajamas clung to him.

"Wilco said there's a dead zone forecast, a big one," Mach slurred, his lips syrupy with drool. "An out-gassing event in the Baffin marshes, a few flashovers, the beginning of the rainy season and all that. It'll be here in a week."

"Right. That figures," Sava said, exasperated. "Any news from East Anglia?"

Mach slowly shook his head. "No, even the short-wave's down—or we can't get access. Nobody's talking to anybody. It's like we've fallen off the face of the Earth."

"We have."

"Almost by design, huh?"

"Almost."

"What're you going to do with that?" Mach nodded at the bayonet. " 'Getting on with it,' as they say?"

"Not a bad idea," Sava joked. "No, just a little experiment."

"Wilco says he thinks he's figured something out, wants you to come take a look when you get a chance."

"He's up in the control room?"

Mach nodded then tried to leave.

One of the wheel hubs clipped the door jam, the paraplegic was too feeble to jostle the chair loose. Sava limped over and freed him. A waft of stale urine and body odor overpowered him. Shocked, he wasn't aware how bad his friend had gotten.

Sava shut the door and fell back onto his bed, waiting for the wheelchair squeak to wane. Lifting up his pajama leg, he deftly sliced across a discolored weal near his knee. The chronic throb and the extremely sharp blade muted the pain. Quickly, he pulled apart the cut and took a look before blood could fill the wound.

Dabbing away the blood with a sheet corner, he could see the growth: a fibrous sticky mesh interwoven into his derma. Shoring up the organic weave were subways of black corrugated veins, the tree trunks to the smaller branches. Slow panic. He didn't doubt what grew inside him. But it'd been augmented, transmogrified, the Morosov engineers adapting Illithium's cancer to infiltrate other parts of the anatomy.

"What the hell have they done to us?"

Previously confined to the brain, the networks had served a purpose: reading and writing thought, but for what possible purpose did it extend through the whole body? A suitable torment for whatever hell awaited him, sure, but why such an exotic revenge? It seemed unnecessarily elaborate. He injected his last syringe of cortisone before struggling into a jumpsuit.

The mess hall was just that. Everyone was too preoccupied to clean up. Stacks of trays filled with reconstituted mush sat piled on grungy

aluminum carts. The congealing reek attracted armies of insects, both flying and crawling. Sava shuffled over to the freight elevator and punched the up arrow. No one used the Crown's spiral stairway any longer, the climb too excruciating.

Wilco sat at the control board in his roller lounge, a filthy blanket tucked around him. Two Alkonost recruits sat nearby monitoring the radio protocols for signs of life.

"Nothing yet?"

"The only link we have is to Al' Madina's Ku-band weather feed. All other channels are dead." Wilco sighed. "Right now, we're tracking the dead zone, here." He pointed at an orange blob crawling over the pole like a tidal invertebrate. "It's mammoth. Could have us locked down for a month, maybe more."

"Great. Listen, Wilco. Mach mentioned you might've figured something out." Sava was impatient, frustrated by the grueling slog to make it upstairs.

"Right," he said, swiveling around. "You know that ARIN number from the intruder's transmission?"

Sava nodded.

"I've been doodling around," he said, tapping his pen to a notepad. "There's four concentric dials on the vault door, right? If you break up the ARIN number properly, instead of 2112-313-1100, say you have 211-231-31-100, or 21-123-131-100, it will match each dial's zero to five hundred ticks. The last number has to be 100, since there's no 00..."

"That's maddening. You've got too much time on your hands," Sava said dismissively. "What do you want from me?"

"Permission to go down to the vault and give it a go."

Sava shrugged. "With all these permutations, how long do you think it'll take?"

"A few hours, maybe a day, depending."

Sava agreed, lacking the fortitude to argue. Wilco might be onto something. What was the point of sending the damned ARIN number anyway? Sava mused. Ex-Alkonost, who gives a shit? There may be an ulterior reason.

"Just make sure someone mans the radio, got it?"

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Mach protested as Sava doused him with water. Wielding the detachable showerhead like a pistol, he scrubbed and rinsed his emaciated rigid body. Mach had been his specialist since his recruitment and Sava had never heard him spew so much vitriol.

"Suck it up, we're almost done," Sava joked.

"I'm not a goddamned invalid. I don't need this."

"Well the rest of us need you to do this. You're ripe." Sava grinned.

He was trying to make light, but with Mach's naked body on display, it was nearly impossible. Mottled, withered, and deformed, his flesh and muscles were rawhide sinew. Bulbous joints, streaked with swollen redness, were hot to the touch and frozen stiff. Mach was the worst affected and an example of things to come.

Sava towed him damp then wheeled him into the bathroom's locker room. The clipper's electrical hum numbed his hand as he mowed over Mach's scalp. No one had reported lice, but Sava decided Mach's hygiene begged for precaution. Mach exploded with more rancor. Sava ignored him.

"It's Illithium, isn't it?" Mach whimpered.

"It looks the same, but to tell you the truth, I'm too exhausted to speculate."

"But it was limited to the brain before. This is everywhere."

Sava said nothing as he finished Mach's haircut.

"Why did they do this to us?"

"I'm not a biologics engineer," Sava said, putting away the clipper. "But maybe Alkonost, Morosov, whoever, had the best of intentions. Their explanation about inoculation and whatnot might've been the truth; this might've been a preventative treatment. The experiment just went sideways is all... unintended consequences. Unfortunately we're the test's mutilated lab rats."

"Little comfort that is."

Wilco broke in over the intercom. Sava clumsily dressed Mach and wheeled him to the elevator. The Crown's vault chamber was abuzz. Suspended from a hoist, Wilco dangled in the pit near the vault's Cyclopean door. The men's haggard smiles spoke of success.

"We got it!" Wilco exclaimed. "We wanted to get you here before we opened it."

"Let me down. Careful, now."

The men lowered Sava into the cramped confine to have a look. Wilco had highlighted the concentric dials to make them more readable. Using a knife, he'd scratched circumferential numbers into the brushed alloy, filling the jerky scrawls with chalk. Sava checked the girth of the door and realized there were no handles, levers, or actuators. He was about to push on the door when Wilco stopped him.

"I already tried that. It resets the dials. It's bridged to a time-lock release as well."

"Then how do you open it?"

"This way, I believe," he said hovering his palm over the lock. "You ready?"

Sava nodded.

Wilco pressed his finger into the locus of the plate-sized mechanism. They heard a pneumatic whisper, the sounds of releasing mechanical interlocks inside the door's inner workings. After a pause, the dials sank like an inverted wedding cake. Vapor hissed from the hermetic seals, warm and smelling of seawater. An electric blue traced the door's perimeter as it opened to reveal the vault's interior.

They looked inside.

"All this, for that?" Wilco gestured wide.

"It's just the antechamber. Hold on."

Sava stepped onto the metal grate. The room was barely the size of a closet, the floor hovering over a column of radiant indigo. He peered through the grille at the shaft and noticed a ladder descending into the watery glow. Like most utility flooring, the grille was removable; the obvious means of access before the chamber was flooded.

"Where's it lead?" Wilco asked.

"It's too deep to tell."

Pipes of varying diameters ran the length of the shaft, disappearing into the low-ceiling ductwork. Hot to the touch, the radiant heat filled the room with a swampy humidity. Where the caliducts diverged to was impossible to say. No one had bothered to supply the sentinel crew with schematics for the Crown's utilities, and reverse engineering the plumbing was impractical. Heat, water, electricity—this was the fortress's beating heart.

Jan Mayen was the product of a rift in the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, with the island's Beerenberg volcano as its scion. Attached to a thermal vent, the Crown might be drawing the heat into a thermal-voltaic generator to supply power, Sava guessed. It was a likely possibility, until Wilco pointed out the obvious.

"There's something on the wall."

Like a shrine, Sava noticed a plaque mounted in a shallow alcove. A simple sentence printed in bas-relief repeated itself in dozens of languages. It referenced a date far into the future, probably coupled to the door's time-lock; a nebulous message Sava didn't have time to decipher. Above the runes was the ominous trefoil, its unmistakable three pedals surrounding a dot, a universal warning.

"Close it!" Sava yelled.

"What?"

"We need to close this goddamned thing, now!"

Sava tugged and pounded on the heavy door. A slap reengaged its hydraulic clockwork. The door started its sealing sequence. Wilco protested, but Sava shoved his way through the breach and back into the pit.

"Get us out of here," Sava ordered, grabbing hold of the hoist's nylon straps.

"Why'd you do that?" Wilco's eyeglasses were fogged with vault steam. "What the hell's in there?"

Sava clambered onto the floor, dragging the hatch over the pit after Wilco was hoisted up. His comrades closed in, curious and unnerved. He got up and leaned against one of the chamber's supply crates to catch his breath. The men gawked at him in anticipation.

"The vault... it's a nuclear reactor," Sava gasped. "Like the lighthouse, but more..."

Exhalations filled the woe-heavy air.

"What? Are you sure?"

"Yes! The whole place was glowing with Cherenkov."

"I don't understand. What do you mean, 'Cherenkov'?" Wilco asked.

"Radiation, man! Didn't you work aboard a Crimean carrier? Christ, you of all people. The plaque! The symbol in there was a warning."

"We're going to turn out like him, aren't we?" one of the men exclaimed, pointing at Mach crumpled pathetically in his chair. "This synthetic disease they gave us, it's interacting with the radiation, isn't it?"

"I-I don't know. Probably."

"What're we going to do, lieutenant?" Wilco whined. "There's a dead zone inbound, and we're like a gang of feeble oldsters, nearly immobile. We've got to get out of here!"

"I know, goddamn it, I know!" Sava paused, fumbling for a smoke. "I just need time to think."

[NB] CHAPTER NINETEEN

October 2163 C.E.

They were called the Van Dallens. Flemish, it was a tribal name adopted from a chieftain ancestor. "Vandals" seemed more appropriate and ironic, a nickname Uri could easily recall. Despite a few cases of developmental malformation, they'd survived the Rhine's anoxia and remained a robustly tall people.

The warriors led the roped prisoners along the palm-lined riverbank towards central Rotterdam. The trail was a ferny maze of mud-slick wooden viaducts. The three Alkonost, forlorn and ragged—and, evidently, ill-prepared for emergencies—were having a harder go of it than Uri and Miriam. As agents of the caliphate, switching to survival mode was near automatic—an acquired skill not easily tempered.

Airboats glided downriver with the Antonov's cargo neatly stacked on their flat-bottomed hulls. Uri strained to glimpse his duffel, but the vessels' massive fans whipped up a rooster tail of froth, clouding detail. No doubt bound for the Vandal's kraal, Uri would have to bide his time; an easy escape looked impossible.

In the faded gold of dusk, Uri saw the silhouettes of Rotterdam's crumbling skyline emerge from the jungle canopy. Jumbled in with the cadaverous skyscrapers was the broken harp of Erasmus Bridge, a Pre-Shock landmark but now consumed by invasive creeper. Lit by the delta's plentiful biogas, lamps ringed the city's upper tiers. As a way to avoid the deoxygenated

lowlands, the Flemish tribe lived in the towers above the asphyxiating haze.

Past the bridge, Rotterdam's old Port Center and Montevideo Tower emerged, most of their many panes of glass long shattered. With good vantage over the delta's canals and saltwater lagoons, the redoubt functioned as the Vandal's fortress. Floating quays skirted the building's foundation where dockworkers unloaded the airboats of recent plunder. A construction crane, tethered to the fortress complex, lifted the cargo to a platform near a connecting sky-bridge.

Skiffs shuttled the prisoners from the riverbank to the docks where the warriors marched them single-file up a rusted stairwell. The building's gypsum interior had rotted away leaving just the I-beams and aluminum framing. Undifferentiated debris sat heaped in piles on the floors, remnants of old office décor. The caustic humidity, insects, and rot had dissolved everything into loam.

Higher up, the Vandals removed their masks and the prisoner's enrichment hoods. Uri breathed deep, feeling the cool relief.

They continued to climb skyward, past the colony's rickety undercroft. High bays filled with spherical tanks held the kraal's biogas reserves. A withered man attended to a pipe organ of gauges and valves. Uri strained to get a better look: Sephardim, swarthy, oddly dressed and out of place. Most likely a press-ganger.

Using a steam turbine as a crude dynamo, the Vandals extracted oxygen from cryo-stills. A wall of metal racks filled with gas cylinders fed the warrior's personal supplies. Siphoned from the main filler valves, polyvinyl pipes branched into

a tree of ductwork feeding oxygen to the Port Center's upper levels and sister tower.

The warriors separated Uri and Miriam from the others. The recruits' whimpers of protest were met with shoves and slaps as the captors led the men off into the tower's ramshackle maze.

"You two have an audience with King Espen Van Dallen," the war chief said, pointing at Uri and Miriam.

Occupying the mandrel of the Port Center's lathe-like construction, what was once the sky lounge doubled as the barbarian's court, complete with animist idols. The Vandal's ashen king sat on his leather throne, a monarch in stark contrast to his supposed regality. A spiked crown beaten from palladium alloy sat cock-eyed on his curly gray hair. Bled of his people's blond glow, he looked hot and exhausted.

The war chief forced Miriam and Uri to their knees. The king mumbled to a slinky, goateed man beside him. Uri silently dubbed him the "Inquisitor." A cross between a jester and a vicar, he wore a floppy hat jangling with trinkets and a motley, but drab, robe. The Inquisitor translated for King Espen, his accent thickly Germanic and guttural.

"The key to proper fishing is having the right bait," the Inquisitor said, taking the filthy orbital console from the chieftain. Its LCD flashed in distress mode, the beacon triggered. "We noticed you both have one of these. True?"

Uri and Miriam said nothing, eyes downcast.

"Quiet ones, eh? Maybe this will get you talking." From behind the lounge's long granite bar, the Inquisitor brought over a tanned skin held taunt by a frame of bowed sapling. Much to

Uri's disgust, the hide was marked with a centipede's tattoo, the iconic arthropod coiled around a legionnaire standard. The trophy had been flayed from the missing archivist, an expatriated soldier from Nova Byzantium by the looks of it. Despite Nova Byzantium's row with Al Fadah Madina, loyalists were known to defect to the caliphate.

"Why did you kill and skin this man?" Uri asked, stunned and bewildered.

"He was a warlock, insinuating malignancy into our clan. Unclean. King Espen has gone to great lengths to purge doppelgangers from our fiefdom."

"Doppelgangers?" Uri exclaimed. "You're lunatics."

With a nod from the Inquisitor, the war chief whipped Uri's back with a switch. He screamed from the sting. The shrill howl jolting Miriam from her daze.

"Your sky-demon brother entered a Van Dallen village and tried to bleed our people of their life force, luring children and the enfeebled away with trinkets of gold. He denied it, of course. As deacon, I knew the truth, and he confessed."

"Please." Uri warded off the war chief's switch. "What was this man's crime?" he asked, pointing to the skin.

The Inquisitor grabbed a metal case from a footlocker and brought it to Uri. Inside was a medical kit: marrow syringe, colloidal solutions, chemo-thermal packs, and specimen tubes: everything needed to collect and preserve human tissue. For unknown reasons, the caliphate had sent the archivist to take genetic samples of the Flemish Vandals.

"A demon, cast down from the hateful heavens," the Inquisitor shouted, arms wildly gesticulating,

"sent to build an army of impostors! And what do you think he was going to do with this?" he pointed at the kit.

Uri's mouth was slack.

"I'll tell you. By using the victim's blood, this warlock was going to cast life into a clay-man doppelganger. The homunculus would grow, then feed on our people, taking the victim's form. We knew what he was up to," he cackled, shaking his finger. "His plan was to replace our kin with demons controlled from the aerial kingdom."

The tirade was madness, a Dark Age blend of paranoia and fanaticism. Enthralled by myth and magical thinking, the Inquisitor was beyond reason. He looked to the quiet king, his eyes empty and sick. Uri had no doubt who ran the Vandal's "kingdom."

"You're mistaken," Uri said.

"Oh?" The Inquisitor crouched, eyes blinking in pools of black face paint. "How's that, fiend?"

"This man you killed was an archivist. The Islamic Caliphate of Al' Fadah Madina is our employer." Uri gestured skyward. "We are conservators of artifacts used for research and preservation; it's our mandate, our job."

The Inquisitor mocked him, hand yammering puppet-like. "Lies! All lies! You're Pazuzu's playthings, the winged overlord's foul-mouthed avatar."

"It's the truth, the same truth this man told you before you gutted and skinned him," Uri sneered.

"And what about her," the Inquisitor said, strutting over to Miriam. "What does this succubus have to say for herself?"

"Don't fucking touch her."

"Oh? She's cast a spell over you, I see. Maybe in the coming days... weeks... months... years... this little slice—" he said, lifting a lock of her hair, "—will eventually be persuaded to speak."

Miriam didn't pull away, resigned. Wet hair hiding her face, she showed little defiance.

"A confession, then a quick merciful death. Is that the deal you offered this archivist?" Uri huffed, nodding at the detritus.

"I am not offering you such a deal—not yet. You're heretics, but useful heretics," he sneered.

The war chief ripped Uri's console out of his webbing pouch and brought it to the Inquisitor. He randomly pushed the buttons like a simpleton, his face manic and freakish. Feigning frustration, he threw the devices to the floor; its LCD screen locked. Without Uri's pin number and the archivist's thumbprint, the device was useless.

"Call your friends," the Inquisitor demanded. "Come get rescued."

"Fuck you."

The war chief cracked Uri on the back with the switch, drawing blood.

"Even if I did trigger the distress locator," Uri winced, "they won't come."

"You two showed up in our kingdom with a small army of mercenaries, why wouldn't the diabolical Pazuzu try to rescue you as well, hmm?"

"Because, they know better."

"I wouldn't be so sure. In time, you'll come around." The Inquisitor smirked. "Gregor! Take them away."

The war chief and his men escorted Uri and Miriam back down through the Port Center's labyrinths. Passing the jumbled warehouse area, the Antonov's cargo sat stacked on metal shelves

next to hooks of cured crocodile. The Vandals were busy sorting the crates, ripping apart the compressors, generators, air tools, and hydraulics for salvage.

Gregor stopped to talk to the storekeeper. Uri watched two men pull Zliva and Pravo from the duffel. Heads cocked, they ignorantly pried at the cylinder's elaborate super-structure. One kicked the container in frustration as another stabbed it with his metal-tipped assegai. A few more kicks and the Vandals abandoned their havoc, shelving the payload on the rack along with the duffel.

Uri tried to conceal his worry.

#

Through the cell window, Uri watched the daily business from the Montevideo Tower's prison. The Vandals were an industrious bunch. Like flies buzzing a dung pile, airboats circled the quays as the crane reeled people and plunder into the Port Center's bowels.

Fiberglass yurts, built atop rafted barges, functioned as the fortress's gatehouse. At river level, the carbon dioxide fog was strangling. An umbilical of corrugated ducts wrapped down from the central vent exchange, feeding the warrior garrison oxygenated air. Uri counted twenty warriors manning the vertical portico, too many to sneak past.

He backed away from the slot and sat down on his musty cot. The cell walls were welded plate steel with small air vents linking the cordons. Strapped to his ankle and bolted with loop, a wire cable anchored him to the floor. It allowed him enough slack to reach the window but not much else.

Poking for protein, he sifted through the snap-turtle broth. For bush meat, it was better than

most, reptilian white flesh and lean. He sat the bowl on the diamond plate and lay down. Pain. The daily beatings were getting worse with the Inquisitor's frustration. Luckily, they'd spared Miriam the violence. Nor had they assaulted her in any way, except to strip her of her console and anything they thought she might use as a weapon.

Through a fist-sized vent, they could see each other. She said nothing, answering Uri with shakes and nods of her head, or—more often—neither. They still had their black ampoules of the cyanide failsafe, with Uri's stashed in the leg of the cot's aluminum frame. While bleak, he hadn't succumbed to the malaise afflicting Miriam. He kept an obsessive watch over her, checking hourly for signs of life: an eye blink, breathing, swallows.

Cocking his head, he looked in on her. Curled up on her cot, bleary eyes gazed into a shaft of pale daylight as she kneaded the scars on her forearms. Content, Uri lay back down to nap and rebuild his ragged constitution.

"I'd let those bastards saw my hand off, if I could just have a smoke. Christ," he mumbled.

"The sisters never let us smoke," said Miriam, her voice steady and calm. "They said it made us too jittery. But there were other things—far worse—that ruined our aim."

It was the first thing she'd said in days. He'd almost forgotten the sound of her voice. Desperate to keep her talking, he made a concerted effort to step lightly.

"The Alborz Engagement... right." He propped himself up on an elbow and peered through the vent. "That whole mess couldn't have ended quickly enough, eh?"

She nodded. "Alkonost's proxies, royalists from Tehranistan, they cut the girls' right forefingers off." She held up her hand and wiggled her intact digits. "Just past the trigger finger's first knuckle. That's when my sisters decided to leave for Nova Byzantium; the fight wasn't worth it anymore."

Miriam paused. Uri said nothing, waiting for her to continue.

"The Hinds were napalming the forest, spraying it with defoliant. Our madrassah was burnt to the ground. One of the senior sister's radioed Al Fadah Madina before our transmitter was hit. They were going to send a man—a fixer—who specialized in refugee extractions from Alborz. But there were so many of us—so many girls."

He heard it in her voice, the painful memories surfacing.

"An older man—a herdsman—arrived to lead us through the demilitarized zone. It felt too easy, too simple. We suspected he'd paid off the Alkonost commanders, which made us wary. But everyone was desperate and starving, so we went along.

"The older girls knew something was wrong, but I was too young. The men, a caravan of slavers, were to escort us across the Zanzan and South Azerbaijan to the Imperial frontier. The Kurdish Zingaros beat us like the camels they rode. I can still smell them, musky leather and wood smoke—they stunk like animals, like cruelty."

She rubbed her scars again. "They shackled us to the saddles and branded our arms, telling us the only way the centipedes would allow us into Nova Byzantium was as factory slaves. There was no

ruse; we were chattel, sold into servitude and betrayed."

Uri looked on quietly.

"At night, the older sisters left the tents and returned later, bruised and shaken. I thought they were—" her voice breaking, wetness filling her eyes. "—I thought the men were just beating them. I was a sister of the faith; I didn't know about men. I was too young. The older girls started to experience pelvic pain, infections, incontinence..."

Uri rubbed his stubble in disbelief. As a man, the barbarism of the Empty World was purely physical, its pain masculine and one-dimensional, simple and controllable. He tried to put see himself as a female in that world, but the horror was too unimaginable.

"They were protecting the younger girls, willingly offering themselves to keep us from their lechery. It worked. I remember the slaver's eyes; their eyes were the worst." She sneered. "As the caravan neared Nova Byzantium, they stopped feeding us. We grew weak and a few of the sisters died. The Zingaros didn't have the humanity to bury them. They just left them there, human garbage in the dust trail.

"When we reached the imperial frontier, we approached a centipede checkpoint. There we learned the truth; the Kurdish slavers were taking us to a brothel in Ankara. A manifest listed us as cargo. With a few gold coins, and a go at the older sisters, the border patrol was about to let us pass. But an argument broke out over bribes. An itchy centipede let loose with an MG3, and..." Miriam sobbed.

"I was an orphan—those girls—those women—were everything to me. They were my family. I lay

there, pretending to play dead. I could hear the dying sounds around me, fluid-filled lungs, raspy coughs of blood, and the moans. It went on for hours, until nightfall." She was quiet again.

"How did you get away?"

She wiped her eyes and continued. "The centipedes hauled the bodies to the roadside. I let them drag me, trying to stay limp. Before sunrise, half-frozen and shivering cold, I crawled to a ditch and ran away. Al Fadah Madina has agents in Nova Byzantium, a network of mosques and imams in contact with the Holy Protectors of the Sacred Mosque, coordinating Hajj and Fatwahs, that sort of thing. After I told them who I was, they took me in. The caliphate was horrified."

"Miriam. I'm so sorry."

Bird squawks from outside and the condensation drip filled the silence. Anger like an electrical fire burned and buzzed in Uri's chest. He got up and paced the claustrophobic chamber, swooshing his cable tether. There had to be a way, there was always a way, he thought. Exhausting himself, he sat down and leaned over to extend his arm through the vent. He felt the trembling embrace of Miriam's hand and squeezed it.

"We're going to get out of this, Miriam. Understand?"

"Okay."

#

On the deck outside the sky-lounge's glass perched a murder of crows. Absent a proper court, the crows were King Espen's only courtiers. Caws drowned out the Inquisitor's monologue, but the madman continued his tirade undeterred. More of the same, he continued to spew his religious nonsense, tangential axioms of Armageddon. The

Inquisitor was addicted to the din of his own evangelism, well-rehearsed sermons of paranoia and devilry. Besides the cussing ravens and the war chief Gregor, the chamber was empty except for the waxen king.

"Just tell us the code!" the Inquisitor screamed, "and the pain will stop. I promise."

Uri shook his head, defiant. Gregor tore into his back with another whip crack. The pain sliced, but fear of infection worried him more than the torture. The Rhine Delta's bacterial blooms made for a lethal concoction, to say nothing of the egg-heavy flies.

"Who are you protecting? Why is this Islamic cabal—this Al Fadah Madina—so dear to you? What's it going to take, huh? A corkscrew to your eyeball, a blowtorch to the fingers? We've got nothing but time, archivist."

The king rose from his throne and stood in a shaky wobble. Inaudible mumbling muddled the Inquisitor's diatribe. This was the first time Uri noticed the old man move.

"Quiet!" the king rasped.

The Inquisitor continued to rant, oblivious.

"Quiet, boy!"

Gregor cued the Inquisitor with a worried nod. Abruptly, the man glanced back and stopped. "Yes, father?" he said meekly, "I didn't hear you speak. What is it?"

"Leave us. I want to have a word with the archivist."

"But father, I can't in good conscience leave you alone with this demon. The evil must be properly exorcised with a regiment of pain. He can't be trusted," the Inquisitor pleaded.

With a flip of his wrist, the king shooed the Inquisitor away. The begrudging son shuffled off like a scolded child.

"You're Ukrainian?"

"My mother was Ukrainian, but I'm Transnistrian," Uri replied.

"I've ancestors who worked in Kiev, in the Verkhovna Rada," the king said. "Back when the Union thought it could manage its problems."

Uri said nothing, eyes focused on the ancient patriarch.

"Why don't you just give us the console code? My son will get it from you eventually. It's not worth your life."

Pensive, Uri thought through the pain then spoke. "Maybe it is worth my life. If I can save a fellow archivist this stupid fate, well... I used to think like you people, when I fought people like you," he said, tapping his temple. "Just surviving, doing whatever it takes, hand-to-mouth; I thought it was enough. But that's how animals live."

The king smirked, gray eyes rejuvenated. "You're an errand runner for these—these spacemen heretics," King Espen said, gesticulating overhead. "Picking the gold from the teeth of the old world's corpse. And for what? To repeat the same mistakes, to roast and suffocate the world again with your devil's progress?"

"Just fade into oblivion? That's your answer?" Uri slurred, cheek swollen from blunt fists. "Abandon thousands of years of thought, reason, and enlightenment—throw it all in the dustbin and exploit what remains. Sit among the ruins and idly reminisce, is that the idea?"

"We want to live in harmony with what our Lord has given us, like our ancient ancestors before the Industrial Age. Even now, our children adapt and acclimatize. Some born in the kraal no longer wear masks. Their blood is thick and sturdy. We hunt and live from the land. It's the natural state of our inner humanity, our God-given destiny. Fully sustainable in coexistence with nature, it's the way things were intended."

"That's shit," Uri scoffed. " 'Noble savage' and all that, eh? Living in 'peace'? It's fantasy; there's no harmony in living short, brutal, anonymous lives. It took mankind thousands of years to pull itself from the dung heap, and you want to go back to the Stone Age. Have at it." Uri shook his head in disbelief. "You'll be conquered, slaughtered, enslaved."

"By who?" roared the king.

"Another kingdom, another tribe, another colony. It doesn't matter. Conquest is what humans do to one another." Uri wiped the blood from his chin with a cuffed hand. "But it doesn't have to be that way, not anymore. We don't have to be slaves to our inner Neanderthal. Enlightenment is a gift. Use it."

King Espen laughed then coughed, his lungs rattling and wheezy. "You have a high opinion of yourself, archivist. Do you really think you and your devil caliphate is going to resurrect the old global order?"

"No... not now." Uri shook his head. "That's not really point; that's not what I was saying."

"Please, educate me. What is it all about?"

"It's about separating ourselves from beasts. Making a break from the past." Uri paused, mouth

open. "Leaving all this superstition behind. But I'm a... I'm..."

Uri was a pessimist. To admit it defeated the point. The sheikdom had calculated humanity's survival after the Post-Industrial Shock, and there was little hope. Continued "population attenuation" as Sayyid put it was a fact. Within a century, maybe two, human population would dip below a critical threshold.

"What were you going to say? Speak. You're what?" The king waited, rolling his wrist in impatience. "Is there a word for 'futility' in Latin? Please, enlighten me."

"No."

"Why?"

"Because..." Uri sighed. "...because it's too fucking depressing."

"Gregor! Come! Remove our guest!" the king shouted.

The war chief swung the mahogany doors wide and grabbed Uri's cabled shackles, dragging him out into the hallway. The wild-eyed Inquisitor stormed in behind Gregor and groveled to his father-king, begging King Espen to let him have another crack at the heretic. With a head nod and a wave, the monarch went back into his fugue.

Like a giddy child, the Inquisitor shuffled out into the hall, rubbing his hands eagerly. More beatings, Uri expected, until his organs ruptured or a lung collapsed, then death. The Vandals were beginning to realize no amount of torture was going to force Uri to give up the code.

Back through the warehouse, Uri saw Zliva and Pravo shelved and unmolested. Incurious or ignorant, the Vandals had ceased their tinkering.

Plans tumbled through his head, chess moves of escape stratagems. There had to be a way.

Gregor and the Inquisitor led him across the swaying suspension bridge separating the two towers. A fog held firm to the swamp below. Rotterdam was a cloudscape of moldering plinths and creeper-strewn bridges. Uri saw Montevideo's prison brig above and the tiny loophole of his prison cell. In girlish anticipation, the Inquisitor skip-stepped across the sky-bridge. Uri tried to steady himself from the jostle, but the shackles tripped him.

"I want the code! Give me the code! I want it!" the Inquisitor intoned.

Uri tried to stand up on the slick bridge slats.

"And you're going to give it to me."

"The hell I am."

The Inquisitor kicked Uri in the ribs, dropping him back to the swaying deck. "You see," the Inquisitor said, crawling up beside him to gloat. "If you don't give it to me..."

"Tell him," egged Gregor with a goofy grin. "Tell him what's coming."

"If you don't give me the code to your console. I'm going to let my dogs have at your little bunny." The Inquisitor pointed up to the brig and Miriam's cell. "And we'll make you watch."

[NB] CHAPTER TWENTY

February 2158 C.E.

The deer grazed in the burnt stands, ears twitchy with mites. The scrawny animal wandered the ash grove searching for grass shoots. Uri followed it with his SVD, a Spetnatz upgrade. The lightweight rifle was collapsible and versatile, a good weapon. A few decameters out-of-range, he waited silently for the buck to meander back through the beetle-infested pines.

Closer now, he swung the crosshairs over its shoulder as he honed in on the heart; lots of artery goodness just behind the shoulder. A well-placed 7.62mm round into its flimsy ribcage would seal its fate. A good campfire, maybe a few drops of liquor—he could almost taste the venison. With a sigh, he fingered the trigger.

"Lieutenant! I thought you'd be out here," Sava said, patting Uri's back as he squeezed. "Thought you'd escape our little soirée, eh?"

Uri's shoulder dipped as he fired. The bullet harmlessly smacked the trunk of a rotting timber. Its report scared the stumbling deer away and out of range. Throbbing hunger returned, hypoglycemic distress muddling his mental clarity. Uri slumped in despondency.

"Goddamn it, Sava! I had the little bastard in my sights!"

"What? Where? What're you talking about?" His mouth creased in a boyish grin. Sava was stainless steel; the misery washed off him like juvenile invulnerability. Uri couldn't relate.

"A deer-meat!—the first one I've seen in a month... and now he's gone, and I'm too fagged to chase him." Uri moaned. He was too weak and wobbly for a tantrum.

"Really?" Sava shaded his eyes and panned the needle-free forest. "Sorry. I didn't know."

"Fuck it." Uri stood up and slung his rifle. "What's another skipped meal, eh? I'm starting to get used to it."

"Command says there should be a Hind on patrol in the next few days, emergency rations and all that. If we can just get to the drop zone..."

"I heard the rumor. The landing zone's twenty klicks east of here," Uri said, pointing to a folded massif of hazy black. "Way too far. We'll burn more calories just getting there... Did they get an Antonov into Khunzach?"

"No," Sava sighed. "Of course not. It'd be triple-A fodder before it could enter the glidepath. And Command isn't about to waste those kinds of assets on Dagestan. This is war on the cheap. We're on a public relations campaign."

"It's bullshit."

Sava shrugged. "They'll be other opportunities. You worry too much, Uri. Anyway, Mach found a cistern near an old gun emplacement leftover from the Chechen Jihad. The water's stale. It just needs another go through the purifier and it'll be tasty."

Uri followed Sava back to the road where the remnants of their platoon loitered. Haggard, their uniforms were ripped and worn, grime so thick the camouflage blurred into a homogenous blob. Wary eyes gazed out from sunken sockets. Sharp cheekbones tented their emaciated flesh; no one

had eaten in days. Hunger and the dehydrating altitude proved their worst enemy.

Half the platoon bore scars from Turkmenbashi's oil fires. Prior to the final pullout, a revenge-filled Padshah Khan sabotaged the terminal pipelines. The Khan's suicide bombers had infiltrated Alkonost's perimeter, detonating Awaza's northern depot in a crude-fueled inferno. With the oil infrastructure in ruins, Tiraspol forfeited the contract, enraging Nova Byzantium's senate. Dagestan was Alkonost's probationary amends, a trial contract to regain lost trust. The only problem was Operation Putin was unwinnable.

"Colonel Karpov radioed Wilco with our orders. It's a small village, just ten or twelve families. It should be an easy clear and sweep," Sava said.

"What's it called?"

"The village?"

Uri nodded.

"Tsuttrakh... or something. It's up the valley a few clicks; we've got the coordinates."

"Let's move."

They started down the valley through dusty riverbeds, boulder-filled traverses, and washed-out roads. Their mule's battery had gone dead the week before. Without a working thermo-voltaic charger, they'd abandoned the robot porter. The ammunition burden was left to the ragged crew, each step an agonizing ordeal.

A small glaze of winter-white capped the higher ridges. The younger recruits never having seen, touched, or tasted snow, ogled the alabaster peaks with lethargic wonder.

The towering Caucasus rose above the North Caspian's chronic dead zone. Lowland refugees and Dagestan's beggarly viceroy had fled the

provincial capital for the highlands. But the indigenous Azars were resisting. The guerillas answered their invasion with ambush and sabotage. Defending the viceroy and his displaced canton was a drawn-out far-flung campaign Alkonost's mercenaries had little stomach for.

"How're we going to do this?" Uri asked.

"As per Proviso 721-23, our mandate requires us to provide assistance where possible, insure indigenous needs are met, and gather reconnaissance on potential threats," Sava quoted, snickering.

"And idly stand by as the local zealots stone their children to death," Uri added. "We should've burned the fucking place to the ground."

Sava shook his head. "Honor killings. Jesus Christ, I'd thought I'd seen some gruesome shit in my time, but that..." He shook his head. "We can only wish Tindi the worst, eh? If Command could cough up a little air support, we could incinerate those barbarian fuckers."

"I've got to get the hell out of here."

"Cheer up, lieutenant. It's not the end of the world." Sava paused, then japed, "Well, not just yet."

Uri grinned. Sava's humor, while black, was never short on irony.

The village was like most in the Caucasus. The ubiquitous hovels were of a flat-roofed brick construction, a small earthquake short of complete devastation. Terraced pastures, scrubby and parched, encircled the pathetic hamlet. Uri heard the anemic bray of goats over the shuffling jump boots. The windows were shuttered and the road was empty. No signs of life. The platoon halted half a klick away and rallied.

"You're senior officer here, Lieutenant Uri Vitko" Sava said. "What's the plan?"

With ranks decimated by Turkmenbashi, mission intelligence's tactical role was muddled. Tired and stretched, the covert force had transformed into survivalists, day-to-day meanderings without certitude. Nobody had the energy. Uri, grouchy with hunger, tried to concentrate on a plan.

"I count six dwellings, a barn—if you can call it that—and a feed store. According to reports," he said, checking his data log, "Fourth Platoon came through here two months ago—" He scrolled through the report. "—and found nothing."

"Good. It should be easy then," Sava said, patting his webbing for a cigarette. Mach, armed with two Turkish faggots, pulled one out, lit it, and handed it over. "Or it's booby trapped."

"Always possible. Sava, you sweep left of the road, and I'll take a squad up the right."

"Got it."

They fanned out over the area, rifles at the ready. A skinny dog darted out from the crumbling ruins barking in a winy half-howl. Using stone hedgerows as cover, the squads filtered into the village and crouched at the doorways. Uri squeezed his fist to get the platoon's attention then pumped it to cue the raid.

A swift boot to the door shattered it into splinters. Inside, an elderly woman cringed, her skin like a shriveled apple. The place smelled of old sweat, sour milk, and smoke, a dingy dwelling lit by a lonely lard candle. She shrieked, trembling hands held to her scarfed head. Uri kept the gun on her as the men searched the shack.

"Anything?"

"Unless you count a paring knife as a weapon... No, she's clean... in so many words," the solder joked, pinching his nose.

"All right. Get her outside."

Some one yelled down the hill.

Uri ordered his men to stay put while he dodged through the dusty alleys to investigate. Rounding a corner, he saw Mach execute a long-bearded man lying face down in the rutted road. Sava stepped out from the oldster's dwelling with a revolver. The weapon was an antique. Fully loaded, it could kill just the same. Uri jogged over to the scene. A single bullet hole in his sheepskin cap, Mach had killed him cleanly.

"What's this about?" Uri shouted. "Why did you do that?"

"He was going for this," Sava handed Uri the piece.

"Christ, Sava. You had him disarmed. Why the show?" Uri was furious. Mach and Sava were too itchy, quick with prejudice. Impetuous displays did nothing but encourage more guerilla ferocity.

"You know why," Sava replied.

"What was he protecting?"

They walked inside, toppled a pinewood table, and pulled up the floorboards. Burlap sacks of barley lay underneath along with a few bars of oxidized silver, the man's entire treasure. Sava brought it outside and divvied the grain amongst the squad, offering a few silver ounces to Uri. He refused then ordered the remaining villagers to assemble for inspection.

"Old folks. That's all that's in these Godforsaken Azar villages. Where are the men?"

"Where are the women? That's what I'd like to know," said a mercenary with a lecherous wink.

Uri lined up the village's twenty oldsters in the center of the village and interrogated them. The babushkas lamented, while the old men bit their lips with toothless gums. No one knew anything, the same old story. Interrogations were pointless, the Dagestani Azars beyond stoic. Alkonost could saw off their hands with rusty knives, and the highlanders would say nothing, not a whimper.

"Let's finish our search then move out. They're watching us. I know it," he said, looking at the black crests of the mountain ridgeline.

They started their sweep when Wilco's radio crackled to life. Uri and Sava crowded around the radioman as he wagged his backpack's VHF whip. He flipped his headset to speaker mode so everyone could listen. Explosions swamped the static-drowned transmission. Over the yelling, some one transmitted a distress call. Wilco sifted through the digital sideband for the broadcast location. They were somewhere east, near the main logistical road.

"Kilo-Papa-Victor," Wilco said. "It's Karpov. An ambush. They're requesting support."

"Okay, let's move out."

The platoon dove for cover at a burst of rifle-fire. The villagers dropped to the road and covered their heads with frail hands. Crouched, Uri looked around, trying to echolocate the gunmen. An excited yell broke the stillness. An Alkonost mercenary stumbled out from between two crumbling huts, dragging a goat carcass by the leg.

"Woo! Yeah, mate!" he yelled with a goofy grin. "We're going to eat well tonight."

Uri stood to his feet with the rest of the platoon. "We've got to move out. Now!" he hollered. "There's been an ambush a few klicks away, Karpov's contingent."

"Fuck Karpov," someone groaned.

"But what about the goat?"

Uri sighed, exasperated. "You've got five minutes to clean it and dress it."

"We'll make quick work of it." The over-eager recruit fingered his blade. "No worries."

"One more thing," Uri interjected, stepping over to the mercenary. "Leave half the carcass for them," he said, waving his rifle at the cowering villagers.

"You're joking, lieutenant, right?"

"I don't joke. Now, let's get the hell out of here."

#

Prone, Uri propped up his bipod and looked through his SVD's telescopic sight. Three APCs were blackened, hatch covers blown, desert beige clouded with soot. Burning tires fueled the pyres as orange flames lapped at vehicles' skirts. A roadside bomb had torn apart the lead APC's carapace; its mechanical guts spilled over the roadway. He panned the gorge for survivors but saw none.

"You know how a secondary ambush works. I want the perimeter swept before we investigate. They wait for us to pile in, and then..." Uri smacked his fist into his open palm.

"It's walled in, Uri," Sava said, gesticulating to the narrow cleft. "We'll have to skirt the ridgeline."

Uri sighed, already exhausted. "Come on. Now's better than later."

No one had the energy for a hill climb. Fatigue led to poor decisions, and in battle, those decisions turned deadly. To save the platoon the arduous exertion, Uri took Sava and scrambled up to the canyon for better vantage.

Resting in stages, the officers grabbed at the dry brush to pull themselves up. Following a deer path, they stumbled across an abandoned bivouac. Sava noticed the tripod marks of a spotter scope in the sand. A few spent high-gauge shells lay in a pile. This was the triggerman's position. Once the saboteur detonated the explosives, the sniper opened fire to cover his guerilla comrades. From the scatter of tracks in the dust, they left in a hurry.

"Long gone by now," Sava said, poking around the site. "They're probably dug in like ticks." He squinted at the surrounding mountainside. "But there's no way to tell, eh?"

"Give it some time. Karpov's crew is dead; we're not saving any lives," Uri said, looking at the smoldering wreckage through his riflescope. "Just bodies, no movement. I have to hand it these mountain troglodytes; they're fucking efficient."

They leaned against a boulder, sat, and waited. Uri took a sip of filtered water then handed his canteen bag to Sava. After taking a gulp, he set the canvas down and pulled out the half-smoked cigarette Mach had given him earlier. Relighting the stale fag, he bellowed his lungs then passed it to Uri. After few puffs, Uri felt the chronic hunger subside with the nicotine high.

The sundogs were greener than usual. More methane in the atmosphere, the gas pumped up the phantom suns' refraction intensity. As dusk settled in, haze filled the valley and obscured

the stratospheric halos. Uri looked up and saw the flicker of the orbital caliphate. Like the pocked-gray Moon, it was a permanent fixture in the night's sky. Uri accepted humanity's presence in the celestial, almost without question, even though the sheikhdom remained a tantalizing mystery.

"There..." Uri nudged Sava then pointed. "Do you see it?"

"See what?"

Like an oil bead on a horsehair, a pinprick of reflected sunlight moved up through the southern mesosphere. Both watched as it shimmered like a gemstone, twinkling with a rainbow of color.

"It's the elevator," Uri explained.

Sava gazed into the sky, mouth slack. "I didn't think it was possible to see it."

"The light has to be just right to catch it," he passed the cigarette back to Sava. "Rumor is they're hiring professional soldiers."

"I heard. Remember Flight 2312, that An-26 reconnaissance plane that disappeared near Assyria?"

Uri nodded.

"Twenty men aboard. Word is they deserted to the Al Fadah Madina. One of them was my specialist Dimitri. That guy was always a bit cagey."

"Command's started public beheadings in Cossack Point, a public relations campaign to stop deserters. It's the shape of things to come, I'm afraid. Nova Byzantium is crumbling."

The empire's mercenary contracts shrunk as Nova Byzantium's Pax Romana dissolved. The days of bold hegemony, like Moldova's Operation Trajan, were no more. Nova Byzantium's coffers dwindled without replenishment, forcing Alkonost into threadbare

contracts. Dragging through poorly funded campaigns like Dagestan, Tiraspol was buckling under Nova Byzantium's insolvency. In another century, Uri guessed, the world's last empire would be just that.

"I'm not so sure, lieutenant," Sava argued. "This is a dry spell, sure, Turkmenbashi was a disaster, but Tiraspol's been working contracts out west—outside the empire. East Anglia's picking up work in Hibernia."

"Barbarian bullshit. More of this," he said, pointing at the burnt husks below. "When Nova Byzantium falls, so will Alkonost. Without sponsorship, we'll be no better off than these Neanderthals."

"I'll never be like them," Sava said, brow furrowed and indignant. "Not a fucking chance. I'd do this work for free."

In the waning light, Sava's eyes drooped. Uri noticed he'd removed his vampire fangs and replaced them with a discolored bridge. He was hardly recognizable from the chessboard's towering black nosferatu.

They waited as the burnished Moon rose over the eastern ranges. Uri activated the scope's starlight and took another look around the valley. He saw the platoon loitering a klick up the road, pixilated blobs of idle movement. Panning over to the ambush site, a white flash swamped the optical amplifiers. A second later, he heard the stutter of gunfire.

"Is it an ammo box or something?"

"No. There's someone near the wreckage, shooting," Uri replied.

He reset the scope and looked again. Sava radioed down to the platoon and dispatched Mach

and a few men to investigate. Uri watched the Alkonost approach the scene. Rifles ready, the men used the ditches for cover.

"Let's move."

Near the canyon floor, Uri heard another exchange of gunfire followed by harsh shouts. When they joined the platoon, an aureole of glow sticks encircled the rear of the APC's remains. In the center was a man, half alive and severely burned.

"Who is he?"

"The lone survivor, the machine gunner, he crawled out from the wreckage and hunkered down until nightfall," Mach explained. "He must have seen us, or heard us, and started firing. So we fired back."

Uri crouched next to the man. His abdomen percolated with black-purple, bleeding out, dying. Dilated eyes barely moved in the chlorophyll light. Uri lightly slapped his face.

"Wake up. Who are you? Where's Colonel Karpov? Was anyone taken prisoner?"

"I'm Lipko," he croaked. "Everyone's dead. No prisoners."

"Where's your base?" Sava said, shouldering in.

The man pointed up the valley, his hand shaking. "Five kilometers... the pass... Echo-Bravo."

The medic shuffled in to attend to the dying gunner with morphine and clotting powder. The platoon dallied as the doc went about his work. The goat killer along with his mates sliced chunks of meat and laid them out over the APC's sizzling scrap. Despite the reek of burning tire, the kebabs smelled amazing. Uri felt his stomach lurch.

"He's dead," said the medic, putting away his kit. "That bullet did him a favor; we're almost

out of antibiotics. Those burns of his... infection, slow death, misery."

Uri shrugged, a mouth full of leg shank. "Wilco, have you found Echo-Bravo, yet?"

"Just about..."

The radioman dialed in the locator with his short wave and decrypted the repeater's sideband. Peering into the LCD, he read off the longitude and latitude. Uri loaded the coordinates into his inertial compass, plotting their route from Sava's unfolded map.

"So this is where Karpov's been hiding," Uri said, pointing at contours of the map's dusty folds. "Nice digs, out of the way, good vantage."

"The Echo-Bravo bunker, it's a Russian installation from the Federation Era," Sava added.

"Good enough place to catch some rest. Let's move out."

#

The turrets tracked the platoon as they snaked up the switchbacks with nervous eyes. Echo-Bravo's robotic cannons remained armed and activated. A quick uplink to Kunzach's modem updated the platoon's IFF codes allowing the mercenaries to pass through the twitchy cannon perimeter.

Reaching the summit, Uri sighed in relief.

The hilltop bunker was deserted. Perched on a mountain, the redoubt loomed over the pass below. Spetnaz's combat engineers had built the barbican to last, its rebar-packed concrete a triumph of the Pre-Shock. A quick blast from an oxy/acetylene torch broke the door's titanium latch. Sava pulled the door wide and felt the over-pressure of filtered air. Uri shouted down the stairwell, but heard no answer. The platoon quickly filed in, anxious to get out of the predawn cold.

"You've got to be kidding me?"

"Look at this place."

"Colonel Karpov's been busy."

Inside the labyrinth was a trove of loot stuffed into lockers and ammo closets. The food was everyone's focus: insta-paks, cured meat, dried fruit, and yeasty bread. The men dove in, ripping apart the burlap and gorging themselves on the surplus. Stupefied, Uri took inventory. Along with the provisions, crates of purloined ammunition, medical supplies, and freshly pressed uniforms filled the bunker's lower dormitories. So cramped and full, Echo-Bravo was a maze.

Uri forced open the flimsy door near the generator cage and discovered a storeroom packed with rolls of Kaitag, ancient embroidered textiles. Another closet held wooden curios, palladium bars, and museum quality Persian jewelry. Sava handed Uri a balsa box filled with Thrace cigars, only slightly dried. He sniffed it, lit one, then sat back and watched the free-for-all.

Hours passed. Too tired to crawl into bed, Uri sat in the bunker's command room, smoked a cigar, and sipped a bottle of exotic Glenkinchie. The men had rebuilt the bunker's water pump, the rattling pipes filled with super-heated water. After well-deserved showers, the platoon crawled into the dormitory's fresh-sheeted cots. It was early morning, the blast shutters filled with the yellow-green of sunrise.

"You're miles away," Sava said half-drunk, doddering near Echo-Bravo's sally port. "What's got it into you?"

Uri refocused his blank eyes as he surfaced from his fugue. "What time is it? Was I asleep?"

"Didn't look like it." Sava turned around a folding chair and sat down. "The thousand kilometer stare... You were seeing through space and time, comrade."

"This place..." Uri said, handing Sava his whisky bottle. "It looks like we've identified our logistical bottleneck, eh? Fucking Karpov."

Sava shrugged. "His loss, our gain. It's hard to complain now."

"The hell it is."

"Mercenaries are always working side jobs like this, Uri. Command knows it. Everyone knows it. And there's not much they can do about it; it's an Alkonost thing."

"You really don't find all this—" Uri said, motioning to the spoil heaps. "—offensive? This son-of-a-bitch's been thieving from us for months. We've been out there starving all goddamned winter, and he was just—"

"He got what's coming to him, didn't he?"

"Small comfort," Uri said, gnawing his cigar. "I don't know about Alkonost anymore. Civilization's last line, slogging away in the slag, defending Nova Byzantium from the barbarian menace—that used to be the idea. But now..."

"We're mercenaries, Uri, like the Greek hoplites of Asia Minor—one of the 'Ten Thousand' units—paid to fight the battles of foreign kings and all that shit. It's the same as it's always been. Nothing changes." He took another swig of the single malt, admiring its sepia label. "Speaking of side jobs, Mach and I've got a thing going. It should payout well when/if we get back. You interested? Might as well get your cut."

"No thanks," Uri said, dismissively. "You know what we should do? Get the hell out of here."

"But we just got here," Sava smirked.

"I'm not talking about Echo-Brave. I'm talking about Dagestan –Alkonost–the life."

"Desert?"

Uri nodded.

"That's a bold proposition, lieutenant. Alkonost's a dysfunctional family, sure, but they're our family, our people, our clan and tribe. Where are you going to go? Run off with those wild-eyed Arab cosmonauts?"

Uri lifted an eyebrow.

"Seriously?" Sava laughed.

"The thought's crossed my mind."

"Out there in the 'Big Empty' huh? But I thought you had a daughter at home. You–unlike me–actually have family."

Uri shook his head. "She doesn't want to see me again."

"Why do you say that?"

"She told me."

"Listen, I've stumbled across a few methedrine-fueled Carpi mutants in my day that I'm pretty sure no man or woman, sober or drunk, would ever want to see again. Don't sell yourself short, comrade. What's her name?"

Uri reached into a chest pocket and pulled out a creased photograph. "Maryska," he said, handing it to Sava. "It was my grandmother's name. She's fourteen in the picture, a year before her mother left."

"Cute girl, crazy eyes," Sava said, handing the photo back. "Sorry, comrade. Why'd your wife leave?"

Uri shrugged. "Svet couldn't take the long deployments, or so she said. She fed Maryska all

kind of lies about me. Thousands of kilometers off on contract, I could only radio."

Uri leaned back, relit his cigar then continued.

"So, while I was on the Volga, Svet left Maryska and ran off, probably to Svestpol; she knew some black marketeers in the Crimea, her old crowd. I remember getting the call from a social affairs officer back in Tiraspol. We were in the middle of hail bombing—a factory siege—in New Stalingrad. Bad timing. During a break in the action, I went home on leave. An aunt tried to help out, but..."

"So why does she hate you?"

"She blamed me for Svet leaving. No matter what I said, Maryska couldn't forgive me. While I was in Moldova, she told me she was running off with some boy and never wanted to see me again."

"Kids say stupid shit."

"Yeah, but at least they're honest—cruelly honest."

Uri paused, eyes unfocused.

Sava stood and patted him on the shoulder. "Why don't you try to get some sleep? Karpov's got quite the cache of painkillers, if that bastard Mach hasn't nicked them all."

Uri nodded.

After reporting Karpov's demise to Kunzach Command, the platoon was ordered to hold the position until reinforcements arrived. No one mentioned Echo-Bravo's larders, not wanting to attract a trail of ravenous Alkonost ants. Higher brass would catch wind soon enough, and the platoon's 'Punishment of Tantalus' would begin anew.

Days passed.

The auto-cannons kept the Azars at bay. The automated sentries had quickly dispatched a few

guerrillas sniping from a neighboring peak. But that was the glut of it. A brief squall powdered Echo-Bravo's aiguilles with a slushy snow. The men, like children, stormed out onto the steep cliffs to indulge. Uri just held it in his hands and smelled the clean cool, rubbing the watery crystals over his face.

Two weeks into their mountaintop duty, Kunzach radioed to inform them a new CO would be posted to Echo-Bravo "relieving" them for reconnaissance patrol.

Uri decided it was time to go.

The threads popped free as he cut away his Alkonost patches, leaving nothing but LT U. VIKO embroidered on his chest pocket. He parsed out two hundred 7.62mm rounds into SVD sized clips. Cumbersome, but there was little guarantee he would stumble upon more. He felt the weight of his rucksack. Topping out at twenty-five kilos, it was a full kit then some: insta-paks, water purifier, pistol and rifle, dead zone tent—the basic necessities.

The platoon was sound asleep as Uri assembled his gear. Loading waypoints into his inertial compass, he heard boot scuffs in the control room's doorway. Sava leaned up against the jam and rubbed sleep from his eyes.

"So, you're really going through with it."

Uri didn't answer, busy finishing the data transfer. Unfortunately Sava was a too light a sleeper. Enough field trauma—as I-and-I's headshrinkers put it—tended to interrupt healthy sleep patterns. Everything woke him. Caught deserting in the night—Uri thought it almost cliché.

"Yep," Uri answered, cinching up his backpack. "Are there any other takers?"

"No, comrade," Sava said, shaking his head. "Three thousand kilometers south, toiling through the Hormuz Emirates, the Brine Sea, and the Tigris Depression... Hell on Earth. Soqotra is the other end of the Earth, comrade."

"I don't care," Uri said without hesitation. "I want out."

"That much is clear." Sava shuffled in.

"You should come with me," Uri said, climbing into his webbing. "Forget all this barbarian bullshit."

"The 'barbarian bullshit' never ends, Uri."

"Maybe not."

After their ordeal in Turkmenbashi, Uri had bonded with Sava, despite their differences. The reformed gladiator felt like a kid brother, a fragment of family. And Sava, with an adolescent innocence, had easily forgiven Uri his cynicism, giving him more the benefit of the doubt than he rightly deserved.

"I've given it some consideration, Uri, and I can't. I know it's bad here, but outside the frontier..." He shook his head. "The survivability index is rock bottom."

"Managed risk, tactical assessments, actuarial statistics—I'm well aware. But I've got to leave Alkonost, Sava. Call it an itch, a discomfort, instinct—call it whatever. I-and-I was spot on. Their computational alchemy knew me better than I knew myself."

Sava said nothing.

The corners of his face drooped with worry. He'd taken the offer seriously, Uri could tell, but in the end, he just couldn't make the break; none of

the men could. Defying the tribal compulsion, Uri was his own animal, a genetic mutation weakened by migratory urge. The idea was suicidal, but he was a panicked beast and escape was everything.

Sava stepped out and returned with set of pre-pack containers. "I found some hood filters. You're going to want as many as you can pack in the Shatt al-Arab."

Uri thanked him as he pushed the canisters into his overstuffed kit. Heaving the pack on, he adjusted its straps and headed for the sally port. Sava helped him unseal and push out the pressure door. A cool gust rushed in.

"I never got the chance to thank you properly back in Turkmenbashi," Uri said, stopped halfway up the steps. "I was wrong about you, and I'm sorry, Sava. I never had many friends, but..."

"No bother, lieutenant," Sava smiled, kindly interrupting the awkwardness. "Alkonost is blood; we're brothers. You would've done the same, comrade."

"I pray." Uri held out his hand. Sava gripped it tight. "Don't let those barbarian bastards get to you. We're better than them. Stay strong. Vae Victus."

"Woe to the conquered. Godspeed, brother."

With a hiss, the door sealed behind Uri, leaving him alone.

[NB] CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

October 2163 C.E.

"Get your deacon," Uri said through the door slit. "I'm ready to give him the codes."

The eager Inquisitor didn't make Uri wait long. A quarter hour and the zealot shuffled across the suspension bridge towards Montevideo's brig. Sitting on his cot, Uri went through the plan. He got up and slid the cable restraint to the predetermined place, making sure it was laid strategically. Another scoot of the cot put him proper distance from the wall. With everything just right, he counted the seconds with glandular swallows.

The iron door swung wide as the Inquisitor and the war chief, Gregor, stepped into the cramped cell. Dangling from the Inquisitor's hands were both his and Miriam's consoles, their LCD's flashing "locked." More animated than usual, Gregor's inky eyes were alight, teeth exposed in a permanent grimace.

"You've decided to bait our hook, eh? You're wiser than your bald blocky head lets on. Now, enter the codes," the Inquisitor said, handing him the console.

Gregor pushed the tip of the crossbow's bolt into Uri's temple. Through the vent opposite, he saw Miriam's forearm inch out as she reached for the Inquisitor's robe. Making up excuses about forgetting the code, Uri bought precious seconds.

"The code! Summon your demons!"

"Now!" Uri yelled.

In a burst of horizontal gravity, the Inquisitor flew against the wall. Miriam tugged the loose folds through the air vent and into her cell, the taunt robe restraining him like a straightjacket. As Gregor pivoted, Uri swept the floor with his shackled leg and cable. The war chief tripped and fell. Forming a garrote from the cable's slack, Uri hopped and lassoed the man's neck with the loop pinning him to the diamond plate. A quick stomp and the thin cable sank into his neck. Eyes wild, Gregor gagged as blood and air hemorrhaged from kinked tissue.

Uri picked up the war chief's crossbow and fired a bolt through the chest of the thrashing Inquisitor. Miriam let go as the body crumpled. The aluminum shaft made a sucking sound as Uri wrenched it free from the wheezy near-corpse to reload. Alerted by the commotion, a jailer stepped inside but was met with the bloody bolt. Fumbling at the falling guard's bandolier, Uri pulled a ratchet from his pocket and started to unbolt the cable tether from the floor.

"There's two more in the hallway," Miriam yelled.

"I know."

Free from the anchor, Uri readied himself. As a blond head poked in, he locked his knee and kicked the cell's heavy door until the man's skull crunched. Clambering over the body, he met the other jailer. Metal slapped bone as Uri shattered the man's jaw with the socket wrench. A few more steel-fisted punches silenced him.

"We've got to be quick," Uri said, flinging open Miriam's door.

"There are two workers near the bridge unloading pallets. But that's it," Miriam relayed as Uri

unbolted her tether. "It's early yet, most of the kraal is still asleep."

The Inquisitor was shorter than Uri, but from a few hundred meters, no one would notice the robe's hiked hem. Using a little water, Miriam recycled the dead man's eye paint and fingered it into Uri's sockets to complete the ruse. He reloaded the crossbows, each with two bolts apiece. They searched the other cells looking for the three Alkonost crewmen. In the shadowed filth, frail hands reached out for the door, the souls inside wracked by malaria. They whispered to the occupants but only heard Vandal garble.

"No Alkonost. Probably dead," Uri said, following Miriam down the stairwell to suspension bridge.

With one crossbow aimed at her back and the other held at his side, Uri marched Miriam out onto the swaying sky-bridge. She wore a set of unlocked shackles and play-acted the prisoner. Apart from the cussing crows and the whine of mosquitoes, everything was quiet; they'd avoided an alarm. Uri escorted her to the Port Center's landing as rehearsed. Loitering on the crane's cargo platform, two confused dockworkers stared on as they stepped off the bridge. The barbarians asked them an intelligible question. Uri, silent, walked on.

The Vandals' suspicion was quickly answered with action. Uri threw Miriam the free crossbow. He lifted his weapon and pulled the trigger release sending a bolt through the taller brute's left eye. Miriam shook the cuffs free, grabbed the weapon, aimed, and fired. With a gurgled yelp, the other Vandal grabbed at the bolt lodged in his windpipe. They both caught the teetering bodies

and hauled the dead under the platform's rain awning, out of sight.

"Anyone below?"

"Nothing," Miriam said, glancing down at the garrison quay.

Shedding the disguise, Uri pulled out the two cyanide capsules and climbed out to the yurt's umbilical. With a slice from the bolt's tip, he ripped open the corrugated hose and carefully cracked the poison ampoules, dropping them into the oxygen chute. Reeling from vertigo, Uri inched back to the platform.

"A few minutes and the hydrogen cyanide will fill the garrison's exchangers."

"There's only one worker in the warehouse. The duffel and my rifle are on the same rack undisturbed. No one's touched them," Miriam said, peeking under the rolling door.

Another bolt dropped the unarmed warehousemen. Weakened from his incarceration, the strain of the duffel was close to unmanageable as Uri heaved Zliva and Pravo over his shoulders. Miriam checked her sniper rifle's counter: ten rounds left. The Vandals—ignorant of the weapon's mechanics—had left it unmolested.

"Any more gear?"

Miriam, with obvious surprise, grabbed the last item from the shelf—her console—and stuffed it in a pocket. "That's it."

Without enrichment hoods, escape from the Rhine Delta would be impossible. Oxygen starved, Uri guessed they had a half-day to clear the dead zone.

There was panic below. Two Vandals stumbled out from the floating yurt and fumbled with their oxygen cowlings as their trapped brethren

succumbed to the deadly gas inside. Miriam steadied herself on a ledge rail and fired. A dead eye, she removed the floundering duo's skullcaps like soft-boiled eggs. Eight rounds left.

The construction crane was in the down position, its thick oily cables a few feet from the platform edge. Miriam tore free strips of cloth from the Inquisitor's robe and rapped both hers and Uri's palms.

"I'll go first. If I slip and fall with these—" Uri said, elbowing Zliva and Pravo, "—I won't crush you on the way down."

Grabbing the crane line, Uri swung into space. The weight of his load pulled him down, the greased braid whirring in his hand. Lacking the wrist strength, he fought to entangle his ankles and self-arrest. Alarmed shouts and klaxons echoed between the towers. On cue, unseen bowmen reigned missiles down from the upper tiers.

A serrated razor tip tore through his triceps. He let go. Above, Miriam watched helplessly as he splashed into the brackish Rhine. Sinking like a stone, Uri fought through entangling lily pads, but the weight of the nuclear duffel was too much. With a thump, he sank onto the rusted hood of a corroded Citroen. Shaking the straps free, he abandoned his payload to the silt.

Back on the surface, the anoxic mist starved his frantic lungs. Miriam reached out from the pier and pulled him in. Like a fish, he flopped onto the floating deck and grabbed his bruised deltoid. Through a barrage of arrows, they clambered across the floating dock into the lee of the Yurt. The wound was full of blood but shallow. Miriam took the greasy cloth from her hand and slid it under his armpit for a tourniquet.

"Start an airboat," Uri gasped. "I've got to dive down."

"No way. We've got to go." She pulled a set of oxygen masks and tank from the poisoned guards then handed him a unit.

"I can't, Miriam."

She paused. "If you're not up in half a minute..."

He breathed from the rubber mask and gave her the thumbs up.

She tied a tether line around his ankle. Inhaling oxygen until dizzy, Uri dove into the weedy river. The glint of falling arrows shimmered like perch through the murk as he dropped to his duffel. Grabbing hold of the Citroen's oxidized carcass, he crawled to the bulky duffel and wound its strap around his wrist.

Uri heard the liquid whir of the airboat. He threw the strap over his shoulder and frantically pulled himself up the line to the surface. Engulfed by the boat's hurricane of prop wash, the rope tightened around his ankle as Miriam dragged him behind the boat. He fought the slipstream turbulence and the duffel's entangling strap as he bounced along the flooded wreckage of an ancient parking lot. Half a kilometer out and the engine mercifully downshifted. Thrashing and choking, Miriam yanked him up to the gunwale.

"Goddamn it, Miriam!" Uri gargled. "What happened to 'half-a-minute'?"

"The arrows," she said, helping him onto the swim step. "No time."

Out of range, they bobbed in the Rhine, the plops of arrows falling impotently a few meters away. Like a disturbed anthill, the towers crawled with bellicose warriors, their wild howls filled with revenge. The Port Center's crane was in

motion as it lowered a clutch of screaming bowmen to the dock. In a few minutes, airboats would be in pursuit.

Uri heaved Zliva and Pravo onto the flat-bottomed hull and breathed from an oxygen mask. Re-oxygenated, his eyes grew bright. Miriam climbed up to the pilot seat and choked the manifold to boost the intake's enricher. With yank of the stick, she gunned the ethanol engine as the fan rudders swung the skiff around.

Past the hulk of a listing cruise ship, Uri grabbed at Miriam's throttle foot to stop her. The airboat skimmed to a halt, adrift under a copse of moss-heavy palms.

"What're you doing?" Miriam yelled.

Uri pointed back to the Montevideo tower.

Crucified to its side were the three Alkonost mercenaries. Uri grabbed Miriam's sniper rifle and activated the sight zoom. The Vandals had riveted the men to superstructure's exposed I-beams like ancient ships' figureheads. In horror, Uri watched as one of the men, the youngest recruit, lifted his head, pale and panting. They were still alive, but barely.

"Miserable fucking bastards!"

"What is it?" Miriam said, squinting. "Uri, we've got to leave."

"It's them—the men." Uri handed her the rifle.

The Vandals had nailed them up near the waterline below the oxycline to asphyxiate, a slow and agonizing death. The mercenaries had been there for days, no doubt since their capture. Crude and sickening, the exhibition was intended as a totem to deter King Espen and his mad son's enemies. More Stone Age cretinism, Uri bristled with revulsion.

"We can't go back."

"I know. Do your worst," Uri said, nodding at her rifle.

"I-I can't."

"My range isn't that good. Do them the favor. They're a kilometer away, and you're a dead shot."

Miriam stepped down from the pilot's seat. Her eyes a cold fire as she checked the weapon's breach. Laying prone on the bow, she activated the rifle's gyrostabilizers. The electromagnets vibrated to life as the sight's tracker zeroed a target.

Airboat fantails streaked towards them as ill-aimed arrows flew ahead of the fleet. Not much time. Uri grew anxious but bit his lip as he waited for Miriam to take the shot.

With grace and ease, she fired off three rounds, the ejected casings hissing in the languid water. Each bullet ridded a man of his misery. No misses, her efficiency was robotic. Tears streaked her cheek as she cleared the chamber and shoved the rifle into Uri's hands. Climbing back into the pilot seat, she fired up the fan engine.

Uri took a last look through the scope; nice clean chest shots, one apiece, like a surgeon's knife.

The airboat glided underneath the swampy canopy as they raced downriver. Channels of open water intertwined through the vast wetlands of the lower Rhine. The ruined city's buildings had morphed into hilly islands complete with shorelines of fern and mud. Through the mangrove's rabbit warrens and cycads undergrowth, Uri spotted their pursuer's distant froth. Weaving the boat through the drowned city's moldering alleys, the Doppler

whine of the speeding airboats faded, the Vandal war party lost.

Merging with the river's main artery, they pulled into a cypress grove and concealed the airboat with branches and tufts of Spanish moss. Sticky heat mist filled the swampland, reducing visibility to fractions of a kilometer. They nursed from the oxygen bottles and waited.

"They're gone. I can't hear them," Uri whispered.

Miriam said nothing.

Rhythmic and steady, rain droplets fell from the branches into the surrounding water. Like a hypnotist's metronome, her eyes gazed into the overlapping Bessel ripples. Unlike Miriam's usual cold disposition, her distance was raw and personal. He reached for her arm, but she pulled away.

"Don't touch me," she said, gaze unbroken.

"Miriam, it had to be done. And I couldn't... I just..."

She shook her head and dissolved into tears. Uri wanted to hold her but kept his distance.

#

They hadn't seen a Vandal in half a day, but the Flemish barbarians proved masters of ambush. Wary of movement, wiggling water snakes and the splash of Nile crocodiles filled their periphery. Near sundown, they motored out into the listless black of the delta's tidal lagoons then headed for the outer coast.

Sailboat spars teetered in a foundered marina. The global flood had lifted the docks above the pilings and pushed the moorings inland. Driftwood choked its canals, sealing them from the delta's wider inlets and open water. Most of the boat

hulls' were breached—half sunk in the weed-filled estuary—but a few remained afloat.

Killing the engines, they tied off to a finger pier and climbed through the dilapidated maze of boathouses and pitching walkways. From nests of shredded tackle, iguanas with turgid dewlaps hissed as they walked past. The dock's concrete offered a respite for the marine reptiles, a rare rocky oasis in the muddy vastness. As a result, the place was overrun.

Twelve meters in length, the sloop was a racing hull made from Kevlar re-enforced fiberglass. A logjam of bleached lumber filled its slip. But with some work, the debris could be cleared. The sails in its forward birth were green with slime but intact, and the rudder mechanism was sloppy but workable. While Uri salvaged a mishmash of lines from the surrounding wrecks, Miriam filled a tote full of rescued bleach and soaked the rigging.

"It looks like it's hasn't been here as long as the rest," Uri gestured at the surrounding ruin. "Pirates, or refugees, or something... "

Hand pumping the bilge, they worked through the night to make the boat seaworthy. A few oars wrapped with oily swaths lit the dock like torches. The boat was called Aegis, Uri guessed, as only the "Ae" and "s" were readable.

Besides the vinyl cushions, a magnesium flare, and a set of winch handles, the cabin was stripped. They slept with their oxygen masks, but in the morning's gloom, a breeze had pushed the anoxia inland. With only a few PSI left in their tanks, the fresh oxygenated air was a welcome relief. They woke hungry and thirsty, their breakfast just a few gulps of jug water from the

boat's survival kit. Uri offered to skewer an iguana, but Miriam declined.

Using the airboat, Miriam towed the Aegis through the flotsam as Uri shoved the rotted wood aside. Entering the river mouth, he saw gray shapes loom up from below. The keel shuddered with screeching vibration as the Aegis plowed through fields of sunken junk. The Rhine Delta's outer estuary was a bone yard. Europe, sickened from the Post-Industrial Shock, had vomited its detritus down the river in a futile purge.

Abandoning the airboat to the tidal ebb, they hoisted the sloop's mainsail and jib. The coastline faded into haze as a weak westerly from the Channel pushed them north. The air smelled of hydrogen sulfide. Fizzing pools belched the gas from the North Sea in blotchy textured ripples. A byproduct of the green bacteria and sunlight, the water shimmered a faint magenta. East Anglia was two hundred kilometers from Rotterdam, according to his orbital console. If they maintained a steady three knots they'd reach the Alkonost base in twenty-four hours.

Uri went below deck and inspected Zliva and Pravo for damage. Kaliq and Fawzi, toiling in Sayyid's laboratory, had constructed their containers with hermetic shockproof seals. Despite the abuse, the blue LEDs glowed steady, isobars and temperature meters pulsing nominal. Scrolling through his console's unread communiqués, Sayyid was already planning Uri's next procurement, somewhere south in the Magrehb. Uri keyed in their current status and uploaded the message to Al Fadah Madina's network.

Sheikh Sayyid Al Azraq Hawat, Miriam and I are behind schedule... still in the slog. Will upload

pod drop location once available. Standby for delivery confirmation ::-Agent Uri Vitko/Archivist #212-MXQ-9XS:: sent via REMOTE :: encryption clock 0.001 hrs ::

Back in the cockpit, he reclined and idly trimmed the sails. Uri tried to lighten the mood: old war stories, anecdotes about former comrades, memories of his daughter when she was young, but like Charon ferrying the dead to Acheron, Miriam stood at the helm's chrome wheel in gloomy silence.

Taking turns at the helm, they sailed through the night guided by the LCD glow of their console's inertial compass. In the pre-dawn, massive shapes broke the featureless horizon. Uri grabbed the flares and lit them. Standing near the bow, he used the sparking fountains as semaphores.

Uri shouted their arrival.

The East Anglia heli-base was a collection of three retrofitted Norsk-Stat oil drilling rigs. With one of its derricks still active, the platform refined extracted oil for its generators and helicopters. As they sailed near the central rig's massive pylon, armed men descended the gangway to a floating dock. Uri threw the flares into the sea, grabbed a bowline, and tossed it to a waiting mercenary who tied the Aegis next to a pair of Zodiac patrol boats.

"Lieutenant Uri Vitko, as I live and breath."

"Captain Zelinski," Uri said, stepping off. "They put you out to sea, eh?"

"Better than furlough."

"It's been what... seven years?" he said shaking his hands, trying to play it cool. East Anglia maintained a brigade of men, but to meet a familiar face so soon unnerved him.

"The airfield, right before Baku. You were on your way to Operation Alexander... that whole mess."

"The penultimate mission before they discharged me," Uri adlibbed.

"Discharged?"

"I-and-I's assessment. Something about being unfit for the battlefield attitude-wise. Burned out, I wasn't one to argue," Uri lied.

"I see." Zelinski paused, cagey. "I assume you were on the downed Antonov back in Rotterdam?"

"An escort mission for Norsk-Statoil."

"And you two were the only survivors?"

"Unfortunately. I'm sorry to report your comrades weren't so lucky."

"Hmm..." The Captain furrowed his brow. "Well, I guess you can explain all that later. Come. It looks like you and your companion have been through quite a lot," the captain said, escorting them up the gangway. "Lieutenant Polansky's on a mission in Hibernia, you can have his cabin. We're a bit cramped here, but we make do. How about a shower and some insta-paks?"

Uri nodded eagerly.

#

More fragments than clothing, Uri pulled off his soiled shirt and tossed the remnants down the incinerator chute. The crew had given them fresh fatigues. Miriam's were oversized, Alkonost recruits typically not so petite. What was left of their gear sat piled on the cabin's floor: Miriam's rifle, their consoles, and the marbled pillars of Zliva and Pravo. His back was a weave of swollen slashes; it hurt to move. He shivered with a gust of filtered air, his body's core pulling blood away to fight the shock. If he could just get into the shower...

Miriam sat on the edge of the lower bunk, hands clasped between her legs. Ignoring her female sensibilities, Uri stripped to his shorts and tabbed 35°C on the flow meter. Cracking the stall door, he ran his hands under the bracing water and waited for it to warm.

"I'm sorry," Miriam said above the water hiss.

Uri paused the showerhead. "For what?"

"Out there on the boat, you were trying to talk to me and I... I just couldn't." Miriam's eyes welled with tears.

"No bother," he said, crouching to look her in eyes. She started to sob. "Hey, look at me." He reached out and touched her cheek. "We do what we have to do out there. Don't be sorry; you've nothing to apologize for."

"I thought they wouldn't get to me, the Van Dallens, but it brought it all back. All of it. I started thinking about my sisters, and..."

"It's okay. It's over now."

She hung from his shoulders and wept, her teary cheek resting on his chest. Pushing back strands of dark hair, he hugged her, shushing her like a doting parent. A few minutes later and Miriam regained her composure. Uri let her go and started to step back into the shower.

"One question." Miriam's words stopped Uri—half in, half out of the stall. He turned to look at her.

"They had my console too. Why didn't they ever ask me for my code?" Miriam asked, puzzled.

"I was more susceptible. They I had a vulnerable point; you didn't. They could get to me. Would have eventually."

"But... How?"

"By using you," Uri replied.

Miriam's eyes flashed with a combination of horror and something Uri could not identify before she dropped her head into trembling hands.

Uri entered the shower, and dropped his sodden shorts. For an officer's quarters the bath was luxurious, complete with multi-spray showerhead and towel dispenser. Despite Alkonost's recent financial setbacks, Tiraspol always managed to keep its higher brass comfortable.

Adjusting the flow, he felt the water sting his wounds. The pain mixed with the pleasure as the delta's grime washed down the drain. Like a hajji, he kneeled down in the stall and let the hot flume pour over him. Minutes past as thought faded to exhaustive trance.

He felt her touch as the water adjusted. She peppered his back with washcloth dabs of anti-bacterial solvent. He hadn't heard the stall door open. Pain surrendered to the rare sensation of human touch. The water pressure came up as she readjusted the nozzle. He felt her small hand on his shoulder, enticing him to turn around.

Miriam was naked, the Khal Al Alam's hardened chrysalis molted. Uri tried not to leer, but under the watery sheen her Persian features enticed him. Somehow in the great dying of mankind's twilight, humanity's preternatural beauty still slipped through. He wanted her, something beyond mere physical urge, a transcendent desire.

Miriam kissed him, awkwardly but sincere. Uri held her tight, pushing her body against the stainless aluminum walls with a firm but careful embrace. Mouths locked, his hands wandered over her, caressing her slim, muscled contours and petite breasts. Miriam's body heat filled him, relieving him of the cold chronic ache. He kissed

her brow and cheeks then let his mouth slip down to her neck. She hiked her leg against his as she held onto him. Hands wrapped around her buttocks he pulled her closer.

"I-I..."

"What?" Uri said impatiently, kissing her ear.

"What is it?"

"I'm a virgin."

Silence.

Uri gently set her down as she unwrapped from him. Somehow the revelation didn't surprise him; Miriam was different, special, rarified. With his hand held to her cheek, he looked into her large almond eyes, the water's hiss buffering the quiet.

"Another time," Uri said at last.

"Okay. Another time."

[NB] CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

April 2164 C.E.

A slap to the digital X-ray unit brought it to life. Recycled from sickbay by the Crown's medic, it was capable of imaging radiation sources by tracing halos of quantum discharge. The display delivered pixilated ghosts of the world in high-energy gamma. Lacking a proper Geiger counter, it was the next best thing. They ambled down into the vault chamber to try it out.

Sava peered into the unit's LCD and panned it over the antechamber's hatch and the Crown's utility column rising through the superstructure like a tree trunk. A fountain of white saturated the detector's pixels as he tweaked the settings; the radiation was overpowering.

"My God."

"What?"

"It's everywhere."

Shuffling in their agonizing way, the crew followed Sava into the elevator and up to the main floors. The iridescent radiation diverged from the redoubt's core like capillaries, flowing into all the recesses and corners of the fortress. The walls were thick with circuitous fractals, the ethereal flow just under the surface. A pump circulated cooling water up and into the complex. The Crown of Thorns with its chaotic thicket of spikes acted like a gigantic assemblage of cooling fins, radiating heat from the nuclear reactor to the outside.

"That's why this place is so warm," Sava said, walking from room to room. "Thin membranes. The

radiation from the cooling water is pouring out in a barrage of needle-like photons."

"Christ," Wilco lamented. "What about the showers, the faucets, the water?"

They stumbled into the bathroom, turned on a sink tap, and let the water run hot. Sava checked the splashes. While not as radioactive as the walls, the glitter-fizzle of radiation dappled the droplets.

"It's in the water too."

"That's goddamned wonderful," sighed Wilco.

"But not as bad. It's probably a separate flow, a leak in the heat exchanger seals."

"Should I get everyone together?"

Sava nodded.

Assembled in the control room, the crew, stiff and achy, contemplated their options. Like Mach's toxic exposure, the mercenaries were accumulating a steady dosage of ossifying catalyst. The gamma emissions were easily shielded; a wrap of foil or a thermal blanket would keep the high-powered rays at bay. But it was the beta carriers that worried everyone. The particulates were everywhere, not just in the water, but also in the dusty motes floating through the HVAC. Small aerosols carrying heavy cesium and selenium nuclei leached into a human body's porous membranes.

"We have to shut off the pump and shut the reactor down."

"How? The core's one hundred meters underwater, and even if we were able to dive down, the radiation would fry us," the medic explained, the Crown's resident radiation expert.

"If it's turned off, we've got no generator other than the diesel. Fuel's limited; it won't last long," added Wilco.

"It doesn't have to, just long enough for the dead zone to pass," Sava replied.

"But what about the water?"

"It's only the hot water; Yakiv checked it. Our reservoir comes from a well inland. But regardless, we should all use filters."

"If by some miracle we manage to shut down the reactor, what then? Is this Morosov shit even reversible?" the medic asked.

Sava shrugged. "No one knows. But what other choice do we have?"

He rolled out the map of Jan Mayen, their ill-fated route to the lighthouse dotted in half-erased pencil. The men huddled in as Sava circled the bay of Maria Muschbukta on the northern coast some ten kilometers away. While on patrol, he'd stumbled across the derelict marine observatory. Located near Bereenberg's rocky flanks, the partially submerged lab stood off from the shore. If dive gear was to be had on the island, it seemed the logical place.

"I'll go out and salvage," Sava offered.

"In your condition?" Wilco jested.

"You then?"

Wilco stepped back into the shadows along with the rest of the men.

"And if you do find dive gear, who'll descend into the reactor?" asked the medic. "That close to the core—even with the water—you'll receive a toxic dose; it'll kick this shit into overdrive, and you'll end up like—"

"I'll go. Mission intelligence trained me in underwater demolitions at Odessa. No one else here besides Mach is qualified, and since Mach is..."

"But you'll die."

"Good, I'm sick of looking at you assholes," Sava smirked. "Now, if somebody can put together some overnight gear, something I can haul in a wheelbarrow, I'll get on with it. By Wilco's estimates I'll have... How much time?"

"Three days."

"Three days to reach Maria Muschbukta," Sava repeated. "So time's short."

On his way to his room to gather gear, Sava knocked on Mach's door. There was no answer. Too preoccupied with their own suffering, no one had bothered to check on Alkonost's worst-off member. Sava yelled through the door, then put his ear to the aluminum. In the advanced stages, the inchoate network had infiltrated Mach's lungs slowly drowning them like a pneumonia victim. His labored breathing was disgustingly audible, but no more; the room was silent.

Sava tried the latch, but its privacy lock was engaged. Mach had sealed himself inside. He pinned the default code with no luck. Too weak to bust in the door, he jimmied the bolting mechanism using his utility knife. With a crack and a turn, the flimsy door swung open.

"Mach?"

He was standing, miraculously free from his wheel chair, arms outstretched like a lamenting pilgrim. Baffled, Sava shuffled into his billet and tapped on the bed light. Mach failed to stir. His mouth was hinged open in a silent scream, pupil-less eyes grayed over into milky blobs. His colorless flesh was cold to the touch and leathery. The intricate black networks of the Illithium spread out like the faint cracking of a marbled sculpture; the cancer had consumed him.

"What've they done to you?" Sava whispered.

Chair-ridden for weeks, Mach—in his swansong—had miraculously stood to his feet then died. Sava suspected a macabre prank, but the more he investigated the specialist's corpse, the more he convinced himself otherwise. The runaway growth acted to stiffen the cadaver making him as poseable as an artist's articulated mannequin long after death. He couldn't help but be in horrified awe of the scarecrow Mach had become.

#

Beds of clay jars brimmed with multicolored light. Sava strained to peek into their hollows but found locomotion impossible, even in the weightless liquid. Small bioluminescent creatures, abyssal octopi or lantern fish, made their dens in the ancient amphorae. But the surrounding sea floor was sterile. At the bottom of the world's listless oceans, only anaerobic bacteria survived. Like seltzer, the microbes burped bubble curtains of shimmering sulfur, streaming from the submerged wilderness to the surface. Without the Earth's cooling churn, the seas were devoid of life. The oxygen-starved poison preserved the world's marine relics like prehistoric insects in amber.

Sava found only his eyes moved. At the edge of his vision he saw hunched sentinels looming in the murk, deep-sea gargoyles guarding the scattered pottery. Their bodies looked prenatal, as if a fetal deformity had blossomed into grotesque hybrids. He could only conclude that he too was a creature of the menagerie, free of pain at long last. The crippling ache, sharp rips and tears were gone. Wholly estranged from the body, his mind shunted somewhere between his skull and spinal bundle.

The lights from the jars pulsed in patterns. Images and symbols formed crude matrices. Tapping into a preprogrammed grid like visual Morse, the light orchestra spoke to him. The messages were subliminal, a stream of universal language understood by the id. Through the coded sequences, emotions took shape from the mystically evocative communication. The meaning hinted at immortal duty, afterlives of purpose, transcendence.

You want me to stay here, with you, forever? Sava asked wordlessly.

He felt a wave of warmth.

Who are you?

The lights spoke of a paternal urge.

But we're dying.

A pulsing hypnotic glow. Affirmation.

With death retooled, his emotions were fearlessly reborn. This was his home now, a silent guardian over a grove of nascent souls. Without life's finite meter, time held no dimension.

I've got to wake up now and get on with it.

#

The gear in his pack was strewn across the moor. A flock of auks had pecked into it, spreading the contents out to scavenge. Sava tried to shoo them but was slowed by the morphine drip. The birds, unannoyed and undeterred, continued their pillage.

Limbs crackling with pain, Sava kicked off his soaked sleeping bag and threw the remnants of his looted rucksack into the wheelbarrow. The rusted cart was salvaged from the airfield for their initial load. Dive gear, including tanks, lead shot, and regulator weighed up to fifty kilos, too much for a cripple to tote. It was the only way he could think of transporting such a heavy load by

foot. Sandbagging the opiates, he planned to double the dosage for his return.

After a slobbery nibble of a protein bar, he pushed the wobbly cart ahead. The Crown's spines were visible to the south. He'd only managed two kilometers the previous evening, eight excruciating clicks to go. Up the ridgeline, his lungs wheezed with fatigue. He remembered a forced march out of New Stalingrad, three hundred kilometers to an airbase near the Volga Delta. In the heat of the dry season, the rubber from his jump boots had melted along with the asphalt. But this simple ten-kilometer hike in mild temperatures felt like a Sisyphean epic in comparison.

Sweaty and shaky, Sava reached the crest of Jan Mayen's central ridge. To the northwest he saw the gray crescent of Maria Muschbukta in the shadow of Bereenberg's lower prominence. Among the shoreline's shipwrecks, a small walkway extended to the observatory's submerged tower. Decameters below on the seafloor lay the observatory's abandoned lab. Sava hoped the structure's water seals remained intact.

By late afternoon, he lumbered onto the eastern beach. Every dun and wallow was torture. A stumble over a pile of driftwood threw him to the sand. Like ripping a scab, the Illithium tore free from its sub-dermal moorings. He howled as his muscles went rigid waiting for the pain to recede. The tipped wheelbarrow with its tire deflated, mocked him. He thought of Mach, now an ominous specter forever enthralled. The horror of his death had superseded a proper emotional response. But now, grief washed over him like the waves across a

shore. He curled into the sand and closed his eyes.

After a brief nap, Sava gathered himself and trudged the last kilometer to the observatory. The causeway's metal grating was coated with yellow-white guano, the handrails untouchable. He ditched the cart and shuffled across. Surprised to find the steel door's latch free, he threw the heavy portal open and stepped inside. The smell wasn't horrible, but the mulched seaweed and algae hung heavy. Cracking a glow stick, he closed the door shut and gingerly stepped onto the spiral staircase.

Down the stairs' corkscrew was a muted cerulean light. He listened for movement but only heard creaking steel and the drops of slow seepage. At the bottom, he followed a corridor past heaps of filtering pumps and broken aquariums, their inhabitants long decayed. Submerged windows let in the ultramarine glow of the ocean. Through the reinforced pressure glass, gropers and wolfish hovered like birds. He followed the signage—written in archaic English—directing to the airlock, his best hope for salvage.

The corridor emptied into a viewing chamber. Arranged in amphitheater fashion, the lecture hall's seats faced a massive wall of mesh-wired Lucite. He stopped near the lectern and wiped condensation from transparent polymer to look out at the seabed. The view reminded him of recent nightmares. He half-expected to see the floating vodyanoy demons, skulls, jellyfish, and malformed gargoyles. Instead, there was a rockery of mussels and barnacles cordoned by a ring of slashed net.

"I was expecting you guys a little sooner."

Sava turned around.

"What's your name, soldier?"

He sat in one of the seats, a high caliber 9mm pistol pointed at Sava. Shuffling over for a better look, he sized up the infamous "intruder." Bald with a hermit's goatee, he looked starved and dirty, curiously wearing Alkonost fatigues.

Sava paused then spoke. "You know my name, dead man."

"Sava?" The man lowered his weapon. "How... I don't..."

"After all these years, Uri. I thought you would've found yourself some better clothes." Sava smiled.

[NB]CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

November 2163 C.E.

Uri poured the amber Islay into the Glencairn and swished it. Oily fingers of whisky draped the crystal as he pushed his nose past the rim. The earthy peat, the alcohol clean and pure, it smelled of the Old Earth. He took a sip, letting the single malt pour over his tongue and saturate his taste buds. He closed his eyes and felt the Scotch's warmth: an oasis.

"Ardbeg, the finest," Zelinski said, pouring another dram.

"Where?"

"Outside Hibernia, we took a side trip to the Hebrides. There was a cache hidden on Islay's Mull of Oa, an old farmhouse. We were looking for scrap copper stills when we found this basement, stocked."

"Better than gold," Uri said, taking another sip.

"And more rare," Zelinski turned to his monitor screen and toggled through Tiraspol Command's database. There was an awkward pause. "Lieutenant Uri Vitko," he quoted, "Status: Killed in Action, Operation Putin. Location: Echo-Bravo, Dagestan. Report: While patrolling the perimeter, the lieutenant and his squad came under fire from Azar snipers. Lieutenant Uri Vitko took a shot to the chest and died instantly. In retreat, Lieutenant Vitko's body was left on the battlefield where it was never recovered. Filed By: Lieutenant Sava Valis."

Uri said nothing, setting down his dram. Sava had covered for him all those years ago. He could have reported him as a deserter—in fact, Uri expected it—but he hadn't.

"Well Lazarus, I'm guessing that wasn't the case?"

"I didn't desert," Uri protested. "There were extenuating circumstances."

Zelinski waved his hand. "I personally don't see any reason Tiraspol needs to be informed of this. The headache just to re-open your ARIN number would no doubt crash the system."

"If you'll allow me to explain myself."

"You and I go back to I-and-I in Moldova. You did me a favor once. I really don't care."

Uri sighed as he slumped into his chair, relieved. East Anglia had been a concern when he'd plotted their course from the Delta. A public beheading in Cossack Point was not how he wanted to die.

"But what I find more interesting is that Lieutenant Sava Valis covered for you. You two weren't the best of friends."

"I was suspicious of him after Moldova, but we made amends in Turkmenbashi. He saved my life. But..." Uri paused.

"But what?"

"Captain, can I ask you a question?" Uri got up and walked over to the office window. Below sat the helo-deck of East Anglia's central platform. A flight crew was readying the Mi-26 Halo for Jan Mayen. With the additional fuel pod, its extended range would just get it to the remote arctic atoll and back, assuming no unforeseen dead zones.

"Sure."

"You knew Sava was the one who'd dumped the bodies—the Carpi zombies—didn't you?"

"That was so long ago, I—"

"Did you order it, or did he do it of his own volition?"

"Listen, Uri, as some one in your precarious position, I don't think—"

"I'm not accusing you, captain. I just want to know. I need to know. I've been obsessed recently."

"As I told you years ago, I ordered clean disposals with potassium chloride. It was his idea, completely," Zelinski replied.

"I just had to be sure." Uri poured another dram. "But there was another thing..."

Captain Zelinski raised his eyebrows, wary of any further veiled indictments. After Uri's recent run-ins with Illithium, the truth was too tempting; he had to ask.

"Back in Tiraspol, you mentioned Illithium and the contract termination with Morosov after the program's failure."

"Right."

"That wasn't the end of it, was it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Sava and Mach were working a side job while deployed to the Caspian, recording executions with a prototype technology, a direct-write that rebuilds neural patterns inside another person's mind through adapted MEGs, an Illithium spin-off. Morosov worked its connections with Alkonost to harvest content for their new gray-market enterprise, and used mercenaries as contractors."

"And you think I set them up with Morosov after Alkonost's contract was cancelled, is that it?"

"No."

"That maybe I was getting some kickback from that barbarian death trip bullshit?"

"I didn't say that, captain," Uri protested, striking a conciliatory tone. He'd worked I-and-I enough to know Zelinski was part of the racket, his protests too incriminating. Sava was too far down in rank to negotiate with Morosov's Crimean fixers. But he knew well enough to let it go. "Sava was my friend, young, a little impetuous. I didn't want to believe it was his idea."

"Uri," Zelinski said, relaxing a bit. "I don't know anything about this 'side job' with Morosov, so drop it."

"Done."

"All right, on to the task at hand: Alkonost will honor the logistics contract to deliver your hardware. As I look through the statement of work now—" he said, keying through the paperwork on his terminal, "—it looks like we also have a sentinel contract on Jan Mayen."

"Interesting." Why Al Fadah Madina had hired an Alkonost squad to guard their nuclear stockpile made little sense. But as Miriam reminded him, it wasn't in the dossier to question the sheikhdom's machinations.

"Anyway," Zelinski stood up to show Uri the door. "I'm glad you've found a job with Norsk-Statoil—the way things are between Tiraspol and Constantinople, I can hardly blame you—but that's where our relationship ends, understand? In fact, if it gets out I failed to incarcerate a known deserter, Command will have my head."

"Roger that," Uri said, extending his hand to the officer. "I appreciate your confidence."

"Good," Zelinski said, shaking it. "And I thank you for helping me file the incident report."

Zelinski pointed back to his terminal. "Those Antonov crewmen will be sorely missed. Alkonost casualties have skyrocketed."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Not as sorry as those you left behind," Zelinski quipped.

Uri looked at the floor and said nothing.

"You best get ready. They're starting to fuel your bird."

#

Miriam shimmied down the mast as Uri stepped down to the platform's quay. She was installing an articulated hose to the boat's aluminum mast, a siphon. Alkonost had helped her outfit the Aegis. A pile of provisions, batteries, and portable oxygen condensers sat piled on the dock. Uri lent a hand and moved the gear on board as Miriam fiddled with her jury-rigged contraption. Norsk-Statoil and Al Fadah Madina wanted her to survey Britannia's western shores, checking algae concentrations and water chemistry. Uri would travel to Jan Mayen alone to deliver Zliva and Pravo.

"What's this?" Uri gestured to the piping and attached fan.

"It's a snorkel for dead zones," she said, dropping to the fiberglass deck.

"You're joking."

She shook her head. "Dead zone's are different out here—mostly outgassing—not like a continental flashovers. The concentrations are closer to sea level, air displacement only a decameter or two. This will help if I'm out too long."

"And how long do you expect to be out?"

She shrugged. "Not sure. Norsk-Statoil's arranged things with Alkonost. They'll pay for

transport back to Nova Byzantium from East Anglia when I return."

"I should be back shortly to meet you."

Miriam nodded.

"Our console's are synced through Sayyid's router. I'll send you a communiqué when I reach Jan Mayen."

Miriam motioned him into the cabin where she shut the cockpit hatch and whispered. "What did you tell the captain?"

"I kept it as simple as possible. I told him we crash landed due to a mechanical failure, and we were the only survivors."

"Did he buy it?"

"I don't know."

"What about the Van Dallens, did you mention them?"

Uri shook his head. "They've enough firepower here to incinerate the Rotterdam kraals completely, every Vandal man, woman, and child. One sortie downrange, a few Hind gunships, and that swamp would burn."

"And that's what they would do, you know that?"

Uri nodded. "Woe to the conquered. Total War. All that revenge bullshit. It's one of the reasons I left."

"Speaking of which. What about—"

"—Zelinski found me out," Uri said, lighting a cigarette. "There was a forged KIA report. He knows I deserted."

"Is he going to report you?"

Uri shook his head. "I don't think so. But I don't trust him. We've a sorted history."

"And you're sure about this? About traveling up to Jan Mayen with them?"

"It's part of Sayyid's contract. I have to escort the payload to its destination, no matter what, or I forfeit payment." Uri puffed his cigarette nervously. "I know mercenaries. I know these guys. I've got it covered."

"I can go with you. It's not too late."

"I'll be fine."

She leaned in and kissed him gently.

"See me off?" he asked.

"Yes."

The six rotor blades started to rotate as Uri climbed in and stowed Zliva and Pravo in the cargo rack. He put on a headset and clipped into his restraints. It'd been years since he'd ridden inside a Halo heavy bomber. They were the Alkonost's workhorse, able to carry seventy mercenaries fully kitted into battle. Its four-man crew was a rogues' gallery; merc vets of more than he wanted to consider. The crew sergeant was a skin-headed veteran, his Roman nose flattened. Stained with grease, the name on his flight suit was illegible. His service patches were a curricula vitae of Alkonost's bitter campaigns: Operations Saladin, Uranus, Trajan, Alexander; the mercenary had been everywhere. Uri nicknamed him "The Vet."

The vehicle pulled free of its moorings and hovered above East Anglia. Below, Miriam waved from the service deck until the low-lying clouds obscured the oil platform. The Halo's nose dipped forward as the whine of the Ivchenko turboshafts cranked to full RPM. As the Mi-26 headed north, the crew was suspiciously quiet, no idle chatter.

Gazing out over the steely gray seas, Uri nodded off with the engine's drone.

#

The vault's superstructure, with its non-Euclidean reinforcements of iron, made little sense to Uri. Inside the sunken core, deep within Jan Mayen's mantle, men in lab coats bustled like drones. In the center of the vault chamber was a pit filled with bridles of cable, ajutage, and fiber optics. Technicians in HAZMAT suits crawled out of the chthonic portal, discussing technical minutia with loitering engineers. Most were Caucasian, Norsk-Statoil men, but a few had swarthy features. Enfeebled by Earth's gravity, they were Al Fadah Madina technocrats minus thobe and kaeffiyah.

At the ends of the Earth, disparate parties somehow collaborated. Gold had a way of putting political differences to bed.

One of the Arabs, sitting in front of an orchestra of monitors and electrical racks, waved Uri over. On his paneled screens were schematics, blue and green traces of a honeycomb structure with hexagonal insets roughly the size of Zliva and Prava. The drawing was annotated in Arabic. Indecipherable to Uri, he could only speculate.

"They're going to flood the core soon," the Arab said.

"With seawater?"

"No," the Arab smirked. "Still water, controlled chemistry."

"I'm Uri," he said, introducing himself.

"Sheikh Sayyid forwarded me your communiqué. We're quite relieved you survived your ordeal on the Rhine," the Arab said as he typed. "This mission has had a high failure rate among the archivists. Lots of aborted deliveries."

"You're from the caliphate?"

"Speak softly, archivist," the Arab said discreetly. "We are not among friends here. No one should be trusted."

Two Nordic men relieved Uri of his duffel and pulled out Zliva and Pravo. With his engineering console, the Arab checked the nuclear containers' vitals then pointed to the pit. On cue, the Norsk-Statoil technicians attached the two devices to a moveable hoist and lowered the gantry into the floor. Uri heard the rush of a Geiger's hiss. The two containers uncoiled their pneumatic vanes to expose the uranium cores just as Kaliq had demonstrated in Sayyid's lab on Al Fadah Madina. Too close to an unseen radiation source, the failsafe re-arranged the containers' geometry to avoid a chain reaction.

"There's a reactor down there."

"Yes. And you've delivered its keystone," the Arab said, pointing to the centers empty hexagons, the rest of the matrix already populated with nuclear larvae. "Now, Insha'Allah, I can get home and off this rock."

"But I thought you were archiving nuclear weapons."

The Arab shrugged slyly.

"No?"

"All these were warheads at one time." The Arab pointed at the twelve hexagonal slots. "But no more. They've been transformed into a millennial power plant, something far more useful. The sheikhdom believes in living archives."

"But what good is it doing here?"

The Arab ignored him as he turned to fiddle with an intermeshed gear assembly propped on a nearby cart.

Uri tried to make sense of Al Fadah Madina's curious radiological ark. They'd created a nuclear reactor with no other purpose than to power a fortress. And they'd created a fortress with no other purpose than to guard the nuclear reactor. The concept made little sense. But like most of the sheikhdom's anachronistic indulgence, it didn't have to make sense, and Uri wasn't paid to ask questions regardless how much the absurdity piqued his interest.

"Do me a favor, archivist, think of a number with eleven or twelve digits, any number; I need a combination," the Arab asked. Rolled in front of him were the complicated guts of a multi-stage combination lock.

Uri rattled off his old ARIN number.

"Excellent," the Arab said, dialing in the sequence on the LED display. "Now we can seal this up and get on with the plan."

"The plan?"

The Arab said nothing.

"My crew's leaving soon," Uri said. "I best try to find them."

"Sayyid's informed me he planned to increase your gold stipend by twenty-five percent. You do excellent work. It was a pleasure meeting you."

"Likewise." Uri realized the Arab had never properly introduced himself.

He headed up to the fortress's mess. Sitting at a large table was the Halo flight crew along with another dozen Alkonost eating insta-paks. Beside the Norsk-StatOil contractors on Jan Mayen, Tiraspol's weapons engineers were busy installing the structure's auto-cannon defense perimeter. The room fell silent as steely eyes glared at Uri. Starving and undeterred, he grabbed one of the

ready-made food packs and sat at an adjoining table. Most of the men went back to their meals with hushed whispers, but a few—including The Vet—continued to stare.

Zelinski had undoubtedly exposed Uri.

Reception was poor inside the superstructure, but Uri managed a signal. No new communiqués except for a confirmation receipt from Sayyid's agonizingly slow PDP-8 encryptor. He keyed in a message to Miriam, telling her he'd arrived on the atoll and would be leaving soon. With any luck, she'd be close enough to East Anglia to retrieve him.

"Who's the lucky skeleton crew?" The Vet asked an engineer.

"Sentinel duty? Some Section Twelve's, I-and-I's expendables."

"Do they know...?"

"That it's a one way ticket?"

"Yeah."

"Of course not."

"Good riddance," the Vet sneered, "bunch of would-be renegades anyway, more likely to shoot you in the back than lend you a hand. I say bury them in this mausoleum."

"I don't know, it's as good as place as any to retire," joked the Halo's pilot. "It beats knee-deep in the slog, eh? These imperial egg-heads have built a downright island vacation spot here, we should all be so lucky."

"Beats the Alkonost pension plan."

"What's that, a satin-lined coffin?"

"Only if you've had your ass blown off. It's cheaper to pack mercs in double."

The men laughed.

Alkonost was selling out its own men for a profit, abandoning them to Jan Mayen for a payout. A form of cannibalism, Tiraspol was selling off its own to keep the beast fed, no different than the anthropophagites on Nova Byzantium's frontier. Uri finished his meal, disgusted.

"All right, mystery man," the Vet said, looking at Uri. "Time to leave."

Outside the fortress's sally port, they headed down the sea stack's rocky trail for the airfield. A drizzle picked up, blowing dirty rain over the withered moorlands, the wind filled with the rotting reek of tidal algae. Jan Mayen was a dreary purgatory, a wretched and undignified fate.

"So they're just going to leave them here to die, your comrades. And you're all right with it?" Uri protested.

The flight crew, walking ahead, ignored him.

"It's a fucking disgrace."

The Vet stopped and turned around, grabbed Uri by the neck, and threw him into a tuft of withered sea grass. "Lieutenant Uri Vitko, formerly of mission intelligence: who are you to talk, you fucking deserter?"

The Vet pinned his neck to the ground with his knee, bringing his full weight to bear. Uri gagged and chocked as he struggled to throw off the hulking mercenary. The other crewmen pulled their rifles and aimed at Uri's head. Eyes dimming, his brain begged for oxygen.

"We didn't want to have to make a scene, but I guess now is as good as time as any," the Vet snarled. "You're going back to Tiraspol. They're going to make an example out of you."

Uri gasped, clawing at the Vet's face.

"First, you'll be scourged, lashed until your back drips raw. A nice dose of amphetamine will keep you from passing out. If that doesn't work, a bucket of saltwater."

"You're nothing but—" Uri huffed.

"And then you'll be put to the Shashka—long, sharp—wielded by the executioner. They'll stick that fat head of yours on a pike in Cossack Point. You'll have that stupid look on your face, droopy sad eyes, tongue hanging out. If you're lucky the crows will pick your skull clean and save you further humiliation."

"You're a—"

"I'm what, traitor?" the Vet mocked, slapping Uri's face. "What am I?"

Uri breathed deep and grabbed at his throat as The Vet lifted his knee.

"What am I, educate me?"

"You're nothing but a gang of fucking barbarians garbage. Cro-Magnon trash, all of you!"

One of the pilots cracked him with the rifle butt, knocking him numb. The Vet pulled a webbing strap from his kit and cinched Uri's wrists in front of him. Struggling to sit up, the navigator kicked him over, causing him to slide down a slope of basalt scree.

"Get up, traitor!"

The Vet grabbed his shirt collar and dragged him up over the rocks. The muzzle of a Vepr pushed into his spine as he rose to his feet. With a shove, they marched the last kilometer to the Halo. More taunts, cigarette smoke blown in his face, kicks and spit, a gauntlet of vitriol.

"Move that jump seat up and lock it down. We're strapping him in," the Vet ordered the navigator.

Using a wireless locking harness, they cinched him into the seat, emptying his bruised chest of air. As he struggled for relief, the Vet smacked him in the jaw. Like grinning ghouls, they lorded over him, laughing, and slicing at their necks with forefingers. He felt his console push into his ribs; there was no way to reach it, no way to send a distress call.

The Vet sat next to him and buckled in, his pistol lying across his lap. With the roar of the turboshafts the Halo tore free from the Earth in a tornado of rotor wash.

Uri eyed the cabin desperately.

Close to the navigator seat, he spotted an extinguisher just in range of his right foot. He muscled against the straps and lurched to kick its plastic handle, setting the halon off. An elbow smashed into his chest as The Vet fell on top of him, grabbing for Uri's offending leg. The cockpit exploded in dense white fog. Blind, the crew fought the Mi-26 yoke to gain stability. The helicopter listed as the massive blades teetered with centrifugal inertia.

The Halo slammed sideways into the airfield, its blades exploding into a haze of carbon fragments. The navigator collapsed into his starboard radar display. The impact ruined him, his crushed body fused with the shattered instrument glass. The Vet flew over him, headfirst into the fuselage, snapping his neck. A burst of orange roared to life through the ozone-filled haze as the avionics sparked.

Bloodied but conscious, Uri reached out to The Vet's splayed corpse and pulled a field blade from his webbing. Uri's hands were still cuffed, but he managed to slice through the restraint's nylon

weave. Free from the harness he fell on top of The Vet's crumpled body.

The pilot and copilot, coughing and hacking from the smoke, fumbled to undo their harnesses and escape their seats, Uri grabbed The Vet's pistol and unleashed a clip into their seatbacks until the bodies fell limp. With a kick, the belly hatch unsealed and dropped to the runway. Pulling at the wrist straps with his teeth, Uri freed himself and clambered through the opening.

Dazed, he heard muffled yells from the seamount. The others had heard the crash. His hips felt tight and awkward as he crawled up a grassy slope. Through the sea fog he saw the shadows of Alkonost running down from the fortress.

Tucked behind a boulder, Uri hid and waited.

Within the hour, the crew had filled two large fuel bladders and pulled the Alkonost bodies free. A brief mention was made of Uri, but not by name. A squad sifted through the wreckage looking for the "deserter" but their investigation was only cursory. By nightfall, they'd retreated back into their spiny acropolis.

Uri returned to the Halo. The crew had stripped it nearly bare. A frayed enrichment hood, some filters, the Vet's knife, and the 9mm pistol with three rounds was all. He'd have to scavenge Jan Mayen. Thumbing the console's authenticator, he pinned in the code and watched the crosshatched LCD pulse the emergency transponder. The battery icon flashed yellow, the console's juice nearly gone.

Miriam. Ambushed on Jan Mayen. Alone. Mayday. 70°56'22" N 8°39'41" W ::Agent Uri Vitko/Archivist #212-MXQ-9XS:: sent via REMOTE/PDP-8/REMOTE :: encryption clock 'processing'::

Uri slapped the console. "Hurry, goddamn it!"

Sayyid's anachronistic processor was delaying his distress call. Minutes passed as the battery faded from yellow to red with no transmission receipt. Helplessly he watched as the screen dimmed to black.

[NB] CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

April 2164 C.E.

The bastard Illithium, mysteriously implanted by proxies of Al Fadah Madina, had run rampant inside the men's bodies. Fawzi, in his communiqué to Uri, hinted at the details. This was the end result, this was what the sheikhdome intended: to create living mummies. The Alkonost sentinels were lied to; the cover story about "anti-virals" and "contagion," nonsense.

A nuclear reactor, churning out power for no other reason than to bleed toxins into the men like lab-rats was cruelly absurd. As an archivist, Uri failed to appreciate the caliphate's esoteric logic. He doubted halting the reactor would stop—or even slow—Illithium's infusion, but it was worth a shot. From Sava's description, the Crown's vault and reactor lay fifty meters underwater, a technical dive requiring stage-bottles for the slow ascent. Once inside the main chamber, the reaction would have to be stopped, the core poisoned, a complicated procedure made more challenging without schematics. Uri—untainted by the Alkonost's disease—volunteered for the mission.

The marine observatory Uri had used as a shelter offered little salvage, its sunken dungeon long stripped and looted. The lab's research ship, wrecked a kilometer down the beach, offered a better prospect.

The vessel lay beached a hundred meters from shore. Uri waded into the undulating rollers and headed for a hull breach mid-ship. Streamers of

sargasso and seaweed trailed behind him like parachute cord. The rent was rusted through, brittle and sharp as he climbed inside. Using Sava's torch, Uri panned the darkness and found himself in the sludge-filled bilge works.

Forcing his way through canted gangways and crumpled bulkheads, Uri emerged onto the aft deck and investigated. A deep sea submersible, its articulated maw crumpled, sat on the decking like a carnelian isopod. Further back, Uri sifted through a wet locker near the hydraulic crane. Tanks, most half-full of breathable gas, sat jumbled near a compressor unit and sea suits. Using a mixer and a bit of valve oil, he managed to fill a full set of tanks.

Like dumb bombs, Uri tossed the steel cylinders off the bow, six tanks in total: three air mixes, two with helium tri-mix to prevent nitrogen narcosis, and a pony-tank of oxygen for decompression. Sava, shaky and weak, pulled the tanks free of the muck and hauled them up onto the sand.

"There's a dry-suit in one of the wet rooms and I think I spotted a full mask and fins inside the submersible," Uri yelled down.

"What about a dive computer?"

"Right," Uri scoffed. "A depth gauge if we're lucky."

Using a canvas bag, Uri piled in a heap of corroded regulators and frayed pressure hose—everything he could salvage for a dive rig. If the reactor's heat didn't boil him, the kludged gear would most likely drown him. With a heave, he tossed the duffel into the syrupy waves.

"That's it," Uri hollered.

Working his way through the ship and back up onto the beach, Uri looked at Sava slumped against a driftwood pile. Gone was the hectoring gladiator, replaced by a holocaust ghost of sinew and vein. Through protein-bleached hair, black eyes gazed absently. Filthy clothes hung from his bony frame. The Illithium blight, fueled by synthetic metabolism, had stolen away Sava's nutrients.

The sight of his old comrade bothered Uri more than he expected. He hadn't mentioned the Thuggee's mask; he didn't have the heart. Sava's dark dealings with Morosov's ghoulish technology had come back to haunt him with karmic vengeance. And Sava, of all people, should have recognized Morosov's skullduggery. But Sava had saved Uri's life, and Uri was obliged to repay his debt.

"Let's get out of here."

"Please," Sava replied.

Surviving on birds' eggs and tidal fauna, Uri was famished from his ordeal. The promise of an Alkonost insta-pak and electrolytic punch-mix compelled him. Once inside the Crown, he hoped to resuscitate his orbital console and confirm whether Miriam had received his Mayday. Despite Jan Mayen's junkyard, scavenging a simple 14-volt rectifier proved impossible.

He shoved the wobbly cart over the moorlands, following Sava's stagger as they headed south. Sava's winces and moans stirred Uri's sympathy. He tried to shoulder his frail friend while dragging the wheelbarrow, but the sludgy peat sapped his strength. They were forced to take frequent rests, desperate to carry on.

To the west, the dead zone's pale haze pushed closer to the headlands. By Uri's estimate, they

had less than an hour before the suffocating carbon dioxide descended. Near the airfield's southern lagoon, Uri surveyed the Crown of Thorns.

"What about the perimeter's interrogator?" Uri asked, remembering his previous run in with the defense's auto-cannon battery.

"We disabled it after your Morse message. It's been down for weeks. But you never came back."

"Didn't you know it was me?"

"That was your ARIN number in the transmission?"

"There was this Arab installing the lock. He needed a combo, so I gave him my old number. He never thought I'd loiter around. Didn't you check it with Tiraspol's database?"

Sava shook his head. "We tried, but it bounced from the network. MIA's and deserters are kept active in the system, but not KIAs... like you. Then after we cracked the vault, no one much cared. No offense, comrade. Sorry 'bout all that."

"About what?"

"Killing you back in Dagestan."

"Better a friend, than an enemy." Uri smirked.

Uri noticed the smell when they arrived, the acrid sting of body odor and rotting food. More of the men had died. Sava had warned him, but the manner of their deaths shocked him. They stood rigid in their death throws like the pyroclastic victims of Pompeii, arms held out in a dying plea to nameless gods. Walking the corridors, the shapes loomed, the dead standing vigil over the Crown's empty chambers.

By their count, four of the twelve Alkonost had perished from ossification. Those still alive barely spoke, catatonic and immobile. Sava's jaunt to Maria Muschbukta had marginally improved his condition, or at least stabilized it. With the

reactor shutdown, there was a hope the affliction would slow.

Tired from the journey, Sava and Uri rested in the Crown's mess hall. Uri dove into a red cabbage and goulash insta-pak, famished.

"Cigarette?" offered Wilco, wrapped in the reflective foil of a thermal suit.

"Please." Uri took an unfiltered Thrace. "Does that help?" he said, pointing to the silver Mylar.

"This?" he gestured. "No clue. But I'm still alive, so..."

They heard the Crown's HVAC system kick to life. Outside, the dead zone's anoxia imprisoned them, the partial pressure well below critical. Sava leaned against the table, his pain overshadowed by exhaustion and a morphine IV. Wavering in and out like junkie, he barely opened his eyes.

"What's Al Fadah Madina like, Uri?" he mumbled.

"The orbital colony itself?"

Sava nodded.

"Bizarre, detached, autarchic. Al' Madina's beautiful in its own way; floating gardens, quiet spaces, a synthetic oasis. It's a strange place, but comfortable."

"They couldn't wait for paradise, eh?" Wilco said. "It sounds like they've built themselves quite the afterlife."

Uri hadn't thought about it, but that's exactly what the sheikhdome had done. Kilometers above, they peaceably studied the forensics of humanity's failings, documenting and accumulating. Unlike Nova Byzantium's manic longing, Al' Madina had moved on. The caliphate's timelines were vast, centuries, maybe millennia into the future. For them, civilization's dreary post-mortem was archaeology, a transitory hiccup.

"So, why'd they build this nuclear sarcophagus? I appreciate the effort, but we're nobodies, expendable mercs."

"Like bugs in a fucking jar. It's some kind of experiment and we're guinea pigs," Wilco added.

Uri didn't have an answer.

#

He laid out the gear on the chamber floor. The stage bottles he tied to a sinker line at pre-measured lengths for ascent. Like an anchor, he lowered the deco-tanks one-by-one through the open grate, and down into the well's ultramarine water, tying the line off to the ladder's upper rung.

The dry suit offered little protection itself, but his exposure time to the nuclide-heavy water would be minimal. Wilco rigged his mask with a UV shield. Stuck to the inside of the Plexiglas visor with epoxy, it would protect his retinas from the fissioning decay. But it was the water's 32°C that worried him most.

"What was your elapsed time during Odessa's demolition trials?"

"I was too hungover on vodka to remember," Uri replied, "They said regulators could handle vomit, but I'd never actually tried it until that morning."

Sava smirked. "You ready?"

"Let's get on with it."

Once in the pit, Uri heaved on the massive buoyancy vest, the fifty-kilo tanks lashed to its backplate. He read the plaque below the alcove's trefoil shrine. It was a cryptic warning. Purposefully ambiguous and written in the poetic style of an Arabic Qit'ah, it spoke of risk and reward, of dark times and redemption. The nuance was lost on Uri.

"Godspeed, brother. Good luck." Sava offered his hand, more bones than flesh. "We're counting on you."

"I'll see you in five or six hours, eh?" Uri said, reaching up for the handshake.

"Aye."

Dropping his fins and mask to the floor grate, Uri stepped into the watery shaft. Like a hydrothermal spring, the heat was overpowering. He bobbed in the cramped space and strained to strap the fins to his feet. Sticky sweat trickled down his back from the struggle, the sting of perspiration filling his eyes.

Exhausted, he paused and breathed deep.

The regulator's hiss and bubble flume replaced the cavernous echo as he descended. The blue Cherenkov filled the narrow tunnel with an uncanny glow from below. Hand-over-hand, Uri pulled himself down the ladder rungs. Ears popped and squeaked with the depth. Twenty meters down, the pressure intensified to three atmospheres, every breath consuming more gas.

He stopped and checked the dangling deco-tanks to insure the yoke valves were properly loosened. Crippled and brain damaged from embolism—his blood boiling with nitrogen—was not an option on Jan Mayen. With no time to spare, he dove.

Entering the reactor chamber, he saw the honeycomb matrix spread out across the floor just as he envisioned. Zliva and Pravo were tucked cozily in the hexagonal cell's center, packed in with their fissioning neighbors. Careful to avoid the superheated floor, Uri inflated his vest and hovered weightless in space. The depth gauge's LED read sixty meters, but he doubted the glitchy

device's accuracy. The draw from his regulator was unsteady; the pressure felt deeper.

In the chamber's center, an obelisk rose a decameter from the indigo floor. Uri finned down from the ceiling to investigate, floating just above its vertex. Sensing his proximity, the monolith blossomed, its steeple revealing a stamen-like hub of fiber optic interconnects and digital gauges. He rested on one of its six triangular petals like a honeybee. Technical script written Arabic and Norse hinted at detailed instruction, utterly indecipherable to him. With no distinguishable symbols and no hornet-hash warnings, Uri gave into intuition.

Arranged on each petal, he noticed two knobbed levers, possible remote actuators for the twelve containment cells. He reached for the handle and steadied himself. The lever felt sticky and pneumatic like a hydraulic valve but moveable. Pulling, he noticed one of the cylinder's vanes had contracted: the kill switch.

Floating to the next lever, he passed over the blossom's nexus, a bright annular ring. Inside, beads of light orbited a pool of black liquid pulsing in sequential rhythm. Mesmerized, Uri abandoned the shutdown procedure and descended through the opaque liquid and into flower's heart.

The onyx fluid, its density balanced between the water above and the heavier clear liquid below, functioned as a membrane, a gate of sorts. Another tunnel, smaller and smoother, dropped through the obelisk and into Jan Mayen. Uri exhaled and descended.

The new liquid exhibited strange properties. The watery-mimic fizzed with dissolved gas like seltzer, fine and champagne-like. Hyper-dense, the

weight of the fluid skewed his depth gauge; the barometric calibration offset by a decameter. The hum of the coolant pumps and impellers faded as he sank. Another twenty meters and the tube opened into an expansive half-dome. A thermocline brought cool relief as Uri struggled to adjust his buoyancy in the abyssal node. The floor was an intricate mosaic of pinprick lights like a miniature city seen from above.

This was the true vault, Uri realized. The nuclear reactor was just a dynamo built to power this ulterior cache. Looking around, Uri recognized familiar shapes, abstract but topographically recognizable. It was a geometric map of the Earth's continents formed into a cartogram broken out in to discrete cubicles.

Fascinated, Uri vented his vest and sank to the floor. He noticed a plaque engraved into a metal cenotaph similar to the one in the vault's antechamber above.

He brings the living out of the dead and brings the dead out of the living and brings to life the earth after its lifelessness...

—Surat Ar-Rum 30:19

Next to the Qu'ranic verse was a legend and cipher, a Rosetta Stone of the world's languages. Uri read the Latin. Most of the text referenced biochemistry and modern genetics, abstruse fields of which he was ignorant.

He finned out from the cenotaph to a glowing cluster, somewhere in the sparsely dotted region of "Old Burma." The dots were refrigerated compartments, small glass boxes sealing an array of hierarchical capsules. The coolers held chambers of yellow and red fluid, glass vents

burnished for cryogenic filtration. He read what he could. The names were unfamiliar: Shan, Bamar, Mon, Thai... He swam across the digitized Bay of Bengal and saw other names: Bengali, Bihari, Sinhalese, Ghorka, Sherpa...

After a moment, the logic synced and Uri understood the puzzle. These were people—human beings; their genetic extract collected into embryonic encoders and geographically organized.

He remembered the slain centipede-turned-archivist the Rhine Vandals had used to lure the Antonov into Rotterdam. The Inquisitor had accused the archivist of blood theft. But it was biopsies, tissue collection that was the agent's true quarry. Al Fadah Madina had spread its agents across the Khal Al Alam to collect humanity's essence, an ark to outlast Earth's turbulence.

Uri's eyes filled with burning tears. He was an unknowing agent of the caliphate's grand design, and he had delivered its keystone. Without the unfailing power plant, the vault's incubators would wither and its cryogenic manna would perish. The sheikhdом boldly planned to skip the Dark Ages entirely, preserving the constituents of homo-sapiens vast diversity for the Post-Holocene.

The project was bold. But the plan hinged on an enlightened mind, far into the future, with the power to resuscitate the vault's DNA constituents. Were Al Fadah Madina's sheikhs pre-ordained handmaidens of Allah, or were they conscious of their limitations? Locating the vault on Earth, as opposed to the orbital colony, spoke of a modest pragmatism. The sheikhs, despite their celestial detachment, were realists and aware of the caliphate's mortality. All civilizations fall.

Despite the meticulous planning, the vault was a bold gamble.

Buried in Jan Mayen's womb, pacified by the soothing bubbles of his regulator, Uri was overwhelmed by rare emotion.

#

"I didn't shut it down."

"Why, brother?" Sava croaked, eyes red and watery.

"Because there's something down there besides the reactor." Uri said.

"What?"

"Everything, absolutely everything."

When Uri surfaced, only two of the men were alive, Sava and a vegetative Wilco. The remaining corpses littered the passageways, standing in the tortured poses of their death throw. He'd found Sava in the control room, gazing at the contour swirls on the radar map. The dead zone—a blob of bruise purple—clung to Jan Mayen like blight.

"You're not making sense, Uri," Sava slurred.

"I know about you and Illithium, Sava," Uri said, switching subjects. "I know about your side job with Morosov."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Sava turned his head away.

"Do you remember a girl, maybe fourteen or fifteen, burned at the stake in Baku? They stripped her naked, beat her, covered her in oil, then set her on fire. They said she was a witch — do you remember her?"

Sava shook his head.

"Or those children in Tindi, stoned by the mob, the honor killing. Do you know what it feels like to have your head caved in, your face crushed by

rock, the sound of your own skull cracking and splintering? Can you imagine it?"

"What's this about, Uri? Why are you telling me this?" Sava pleaded, tears welling.

"I know how it must have felt, every terrifying minute."

"No. No way." Sava shook his head, childlike. "That's impossible, Uri. How could you have—"

"Vicariously. I relived the brutality through their eyes like it was preserved in amber. Just like you and Mach recorded it."

"How?"

"I stumbled across it." Uri shook his slumped head, shoulders hunched. "Someone in Al Fadah Madina asked me to procure an artifact—a mask used by a Thuggee death cult in Mumbai—adapted from an earlier variant of Morosov's alpha-write technology, a gray-market MEG. So I tried it."

"Why, Uri? That sideshow wasn't meant for you."

"Then for whom was it meant?" Uri shouted.

Sava shrugged and said nothing, his face filled with shame.

Uri stood and turned away, lighting a cigarette. "Goddamn it, Sava." He sighed. "I thought you were better than all that shit. Why didn't you and the men leave with me at Echo-Bravo, huh? Leave the life behind."

Sava quivered. "Because I'm not you, Uri. I'm a mercenary; it's who I am. Alkonost are my people. Tiraspol's my homeland."

"Every man has freewill, comrade."

"Every man? Even those barbarian trops Nova Byzantium paid us to fight day-in and day-out? Even them?"

"Even them."

Sava said nothing, strands of saliva dangling from his lips.

"Why did you do it, Sava?"

"Why do we do anything, Uri? We're mercenaries. If I could make a little money from recording those fuckers tear themselves apart, it was the next best thing, right? What're they to me?"

"Human beings," Uri answered coldly, lifting Sava's lips to expose his removed canines. "An eye-for-an-eye, a tooth-for-a-tooth, and all that, right Sava?"

Sava limply batted Uri's hand away. His eyes were graying over. He was fading as the last muscles hardened, squeezing the life from him. "You're just the same, Uri. Taking money from those Arab cosmonauts, doing their dirty work," Sava argued.

"No," Uri said. "No, I'm not the same."

"You don't sound completely convinced."

"Earlier today, I don't think I was... but now I am," Uri nodded his head then continued. "This is all part of the plan, Sava. It's important that you die here, like this."

"How can you say that? Whose plan?"

"The caliphate's, Al Fadah Madina's."

"To die like this?" Sava looked up, eyes blistered with hemorrhage. "Who the hell are they to judge me?"

Uri shook his head. "It's not like that, Sava. You're part of the construction now, just like the concrete and rebar, a fully integrated facet of the sheikhdom's design. With you, this place is complete."

"I don't understand," Sava wept, shaking his head, body rigid despite sobs.

Uri continued. "The Morosov procedure back in Kharkov: Al Fadah Madina cut a deal with Alkonost to have something implanted into you and your comrades prior to Jan Mayen. The anti-toxins were, in fact, a fractal network of self-assemblers mutated from Illithium then surgically introduced. It was done on purpose. No longer isolated to the cranium, the fibrous synthetics were augmented to spread to the rest of the body."

"Fucking hell..." Sava whimpered.

"The only way to stop the growth was through a steady dose of radiation." Uri gestured to the walls around them and the reactor below. "But the result is mummification. The intricate networks of micro-constructs are fossilizing your body, preserving you like a mummified pharaoh."

"Is this revenge for Illithium? Is that what this is all about?"

"No, brother." Uri shook his head and held Sava's skeletal hand. "Not revenge. Everything else—the Morosov side-job, your alpha-wave recordings—is circumstantial: wrong place, wrong time. You and your men are now this vault's entombed protectors, its sentinels. That was the truth; they didn't lie to you about that."

"Well, it's God paying me back. Divine punishment. There's no other explanation. It has to be."

"If you believe in God," Uri winked.

Sava paused then spoke. "What's in the vault, Uri?"

Uri told him.

Sava said nothing, eyes peaceful and unfocused. Seconds passed as he started to fade.

"Thank you for saving me, brother," Uri said, his hand caressing Sava's cheek. "And I'm sorry I

couldn't save you."

Sava's mouth slackened as his eyes closed.

Uri finished his cigarette and watched his friend die in the glow of the control room's digital light. Sava exhaled a death rattle, long and slow. Then like his comrades before him, he stood from his chair and froze with rigor mortis, perfectly balanced. Uri touched him, his flesh felt like rawhide. He could see the Illithium networks bulging under the waxen skin, spreading from his joints like a web. The network provided the scaffold for his cadaver, now malleable and able to be positioned.

Regret and pity faded as Uri went to work.

The Crown of Thorns, with its urchin-like iron spines, evoked a universal doom. Much as Al Fadah Madina had intended, Uri arranged the dead throughout the monument, posing their bodies into tortured scarecrows. Pain, horror, humiliation, shame, and desperation: the prime movers of the superstitious. This was the affect the sheikhs wanted to evoke.

The sacrificed Alkonost completed the ominous set piece, warning future intruders that this place honors nothing or no one, that this place is taboo.

Beyond the Post-Industrial Shock, archeologists of a new enlightenment would disregard their vestigial fear, dismissing the Crown's curse to exhume Al Fadah Madina's gift. Passing through the bottleneck of extinction, a diminished few would resurrect humanity's lost.

This was the grand hope.

In the drawer of an aluminum bureau, next to an unmade bed, Uri found the small plastic box. Inside were Sava's chrome fangs. He polished them

to a silvery sheen, admiring the tempered metalwork. Adjusting the wire bridge, he pushed the canines into Sava's desiccated sockets with blobs of waterproof epoxy. Mouth open in a frozen hiss, eyes blacked over with necrosis, the effect was menacing. Sava, in death, was transformed into a pale wraith wrenched from a cold underworld. In the vault's central chamber, Uri manipulated Sava into the Crown's vampire centerpiece then said goodbye.

#

Days wore on.

Waiting out the dead zone, Uri managed to recoil a transformer and jump-lead his console to charge the battery. Jan Mayen's higher latitude attenuated the signal, but a brief spurt of bandwidth allowed him to download his long-delayed communiqués.

With a pack of ration cigarettes and a bottle of fiery vodka, Uri sat vigil in the mess's western lounge. A fog drew in with the arctic current. A cold front was forecast for the island as the carbon dioxide dipped below threshold. Nearly asleep, Uri stirred and looked out over Jan Mayen's southern shore.

Through a curtain of wet snow, the triangular shape of a sail emerged from the pale twilight.

[NB] SURFACE TENSION

The Berber waited. Beyond the anoxic fog were the Alkonost flotillas—or so he was led to believe. The flotsam of previous eras crowded the horizon. An intact ship could easily be hiding among the junk. He limped through the ruins of the seaside coffee shop. Its folded chrome and shattered glass glittered in the predawn. This forgotten tourist zone—this no man's land between armies—had a limbo feel to it; as if Allah couldn't make up his mind. The anemic air had stalled the decay. Not even insects found the place welcoming.

"Israt. Are you there?" The radio crackled to life.

"Here," he replied after fumbling with the receiver. "I hear you."

"Have you made contact?"

"No... not yet." He peered through the binoculars to have another look. Nothing. "How many are you expecting?"

"Most likely a small landing team, a vanguard." Anything more would raise suspicions, Israt surmised. "They radioed last night. Landfall at 0730."

"They're late. And the air's getting thin."

"Stop complaining Berber," said the radio voice. "Your filter's good for another few hours. Stay put."

The rattle of artillery interrupted the transmission. Landward, flashes flickered the pre-dawn gloom. From the direction of the report, Israt guessed it was a Centipede volley. The

Vandals never dusted up first. Too much to lose. The barbarians had the Carthage beachhead surrounded. Nova Byzantium's invasion had stalled, and supply lines from Constantinople faced a nettle of Sidran pirates and Aegean warlords.

But sending the empire's territorial army west was destined to failure. Anybody who knew anything could have told them that. But Israt gladly took their gold none-the-less. They were desperate for indigenous allies in the Maghreb, and he had offered his services.

Israt looked eastward and scanned the cliffs of old Carthage. The shard of Al'Tunis Casbah stood untarnished above the city. The strange windowless building of unknown origin lorded over the listless Mediterranean. Whatever its original purpose, it now doubled as the Centipedes' redoubt. Just a throw from the shoreline, it was as far as the invasion had pushed inland.

"I see you," said a disembodied voice. The accent Israt couldn't place.

He tapped his earpiece. "Hello? Who is this?"

"Turn off your radio," the voice commanded.

"But..."

"-Turn it off!"

Israt shut off the transceiver. Shuffling outside the coffee shop, he crouched near a fallen minaret and gazed at the shore through the remains of a seaside mosque. A glint of the rising sun blinded him. Too bright, his afflicted eyes saturated with the crimson light. Due to the ever-present haze such moments were rare; he found himself dazzled. He paused to listen but only heard lethargic waves lick the shore. No tell-tale whir of a boat engine. If it was the liaison radioing him, they had arrived unbeknownst.

"Don't turn around."

Israt felt the bump of a rifle muzzle against the back of his skull. "How?" He whispered to himself. To sneak ashore with such stealth, it was impressive.

"Do you have any weapons?"

"A pistol. Holstered on my thigh."

"Remove it and set it on the ground. Then slowly turn around."

Israt did as ordered. The mercenary kept a muffled rifle barrel aimed at his head. There was something alien about him. His fatigues and kit resembled a Centipede's but more advanced and newer, not the typical salvage. His enrichment hood was a combat model of post-Shock manufacture and it had a demon-like menace. Israt had heard stories about the mercenaries of Alkonost but had never met one in the flesh. Much to his surprise, the soldier was unaccompanied.

"I was expecting more of you," Israt said, looking over the mercenaries shoulder. "The general gave me the impression that..."

"-You're a leper," the man exclaimed.

Bad oxygen units harbored the infection, rarely sanitized in the field. An untreatable strain, Israt had been disfigured by the disease years prior. Despite a field doctor's best efforts, they told him the disease was drug resistant. The facial lesions were the most noticeable, even with his breathing mask. Pox-like lumps hid his former identity; his face bubbled with unfeeling protuberances.

"It's the numbness that's the worst, especially in the anoxia," Israt said, rubbing his finger stubs. "I'm very much ambulatory despite some wasting in my legs."

"You must be Israt?"

He nodded. "And you're the Savior of Al'Tunis?"

The man shook his head. "I prefer the term 'attache.' Alkonost's contract fees for 'savior' services would break Nova Byzantium's banks." The man slung his rifle and extended an ungloved hand. "Colonel Riks."

"Israt." Surprised, he shook his hand with a solid grip. "Aren't you afraid?"

"We garrisoned near lepers in Dagestan on the frontier. Alkonost, unlike most of our barbarian adversaires, understand epidemiology."

"I see," Israt replied, stupefied. "Well," he paused, gesturing towards old Carthage and its preternatural casbah, "the patrols will be by soon. We best get moving."

Lake Tunis, just inland, was de facto no man's land. They skirted the shoreline careful to avoid breaches in the rubble, anywhere snipers might take a potshot. Unlikely, but Israt felt it wise to take precaution. He gasped slightly then synched his mask tighter. The magenta lake's sulfur spew was in fine form today, the reek nothing short of the underworld itself. He set a slower pace to insure both their enrichment hoods kept up.

"Anaerobic bacteria," Israt whispered, pointing at the listless water.

"How's that?"

"Stagnant. No oxygen. Sunlight causes the bloom and creates the outgassing. Toxic if we stay too long."

Riks paused to gaze at the lake's opaque waters. Israt tried to peer through the green tint of the man's face mask, suspicious of the colonel. What was he looking at? Did he suspect something? Riks

was trying to survey more than just his immediate surroundings; that much was obvious. Mercenaries weren't known for subtlety.

"See something?" Israt inquired.

Riks paused then turned to look at him. "No," he replied. "Nothing."

"Vandal territory starts on the other side of the lake," Israt offered, pointing out a barely visible makeshift bunker. "If that's what you were looking at."

Riks nodded with a shrug. Israt checked his chronometer and suggested they hurry. The mercenary paused again as if to ask a question but said nothing. The masks obscured all; Israt was desperate to try to get a read on him. They shuffled over the remains of a canal footbridge that led inland. A pitch eastward and the trench network started. The ditches cleaved the city's peninsula in two, amputating Old Carthage from the African continent. The invasion—now two years on—and its subsequent battles created stasis. As a result, the battlefield had ossified. Now everything was quiet.

"Wait." Israt held his hand up, clenched his fist, and squatted.

"Why?"

"A patrol."

Riks unslung his rifle and panned the murk. "My sensor's aren't picking up anything, even in long wave infrared. Are you sure?"

Israt checked his chronometer again. "Yes."

Ten minutes passed before they spotted them, silhouettes materializing out of the fog. Finding cover in a crater, the pair hunkered down to observe. Ten Vandal warriors escorted a contingent of prisoners, young Centipede recruits still

boyishly thin. An intimidating bunch, the shirtless barbarians were painted in the blue and orange of their northern homeland. The squad had small oxygen tanks slung on their backs attached to breather masks. Their people had salvaged the lost art of oxygen manufacture and had sworn off the enrichment process used by the remnants of the civilized world. It gave them a quick boost of speed in battle, but little to no endurance.

The war chief ordered the prisoners to their knees. The group prodded the wretches with the points of their crossbows. One by one they tore off their enrichment hoods. Gasping like fish, the men struggled to hold their breath at first. After a quarter hour, they began to cough and struggle for air, mucus streaming from their noses.

"Miserable savages," Riks whispered. "I should..."

"No!" Israt gave a muted shout. Pushing the colonel's rifle muzzle down.

"My rifle's silenced. No report," Riks argued back. "I can kill them all before the first one hits the ground."

"Another patrol will be along shortly," Israt stammered. "They'll find the bodies. We'll be discovered."

"How are you so sure, leper?"

"Because that's why the Centipedes pay me."

Agitated but hesitant, Riks stood down. Another fifteen minutes passed until the last prisoner folder over into the mud. Vomit and excrement pooled around their bodies. Ghastly business. The Vandals used Carthage's hostile environment to perform field executions, saving oxygen, calories, and ammunition. Most dead zones took time to kill an individual if exposed, but not so much in

Carthage. The lake and harbor fueled the seasonal maelstrom. Trapped by Saharan siroccos, the sulfur dioxide never filtered out.

Unceremoniously, the men heaved the Centipedes into a makeshift trench. A few kicks of dirt to dust the corpses, and the warriors moved on. Annoyed, Riks ignored Israt's caution and continued to march towards the Casbah undeterred. Close to the Centipede tripwire, Israt turned on his radio and messaged a forward outpost to identify themselves. After a minute, a squad escorted them inside the invasion force's cordon.

"We'll take the Casbah's eastward entrance. Mission intelligence. It's where General Sadik spends his time."

Colonel Riks stopped a few meters short of the lower sally port and gazed at the seamless pyramid, its smooth onyx sheen reflecting the leaden sky. With a quick draw of his sidearm, the mercenary unloaded a volley of silenced rounds into the casbah walls. Squinting, Israt peered at the chinks. Small divots pocked the surface. It didn't take long; the miniature craters soon sealed themselves, the blemishes no more. The mercenary nodded to himself in satisfaction.

"You had to see for yourself, didn't you?" Israt asked. "It's like magic, no?"

"No magic. More like Crimean meta-magnetics. Let's go inside."

#

"Is this a joke?" General Sadik grimaced. "Alkonost sent one goddamned mercenary? What are we in, the fucking 5th Century B.C.? Does Alkonost fancy itself Sparta?"

"No joke," the mercenary Riks replied.

"We've been waiting five months for reinforcements –five god damned months!" The Centipede held up his right hand, all fingers extended. "Constantinople paid for two battalions of Alkonost mercenaries. That's what they told me. There should be a fleet of Odessan Class landing ships offshore, now!"

"The contract has been re-negotiated," Riks said meekly. "Constantinople has re-prioritized its existing efforts with Alkonost. The retaking of Al Quds is sapping the empire's financial resources. Operations were recently reshuffled."

"Why are you the one to tell me this?" the general said, exasperated. "Why don't I know this already?" he asked no one in particular.

The Centipedes were the territorial army of Nova Byzantium, a reinvention of the old Roman 'centurions.' Restricted to the imperial frontier, Constantinople relied on Alkonost mercenaries for its expeditionary campaigns. The invasion of Tunis –Old Carthage– by the Centipedes was to be a point of pride. Reclaiming a portion of the barbaric West for the civilized world would have been a propaganda coup for Earth's last empire and its senators. Like ancient Byzantium –from which their inspiration was derived– this patch of the Maghreb would have been rechristened an official exclave of the empire, a small victory over the Post-Industrial Shock.

But the whole thing had bogged down, the military failure orphaned.

Israt had read the handwriting on the wall, but General Sadik and the Carthage command were in denial. Radio transmissions from Constantinople were given short shrift. Supplies failed to show on time –if at all– and now the jubilation of

reinforcements were dashed. The army had been abandoned in place.

"I'm here to tell you this because Constantinople hasn't the stomachs apparently," Riks said. "I'm also here to bail you out of your quagmire. I'm here to win this for you as dictated by Alkonost's current contract."

General Sadik laughed, his eyes wide in disbelief. "One man? You're kidding!"

Colonel Riks said nothing and paced the map room. A few of Sadik's lieutenants stood silent – almost in a quorum– as they watched the mercenary study the room's interior. Constructed like a cathedral's chapter house, octagonal walls converged into an arched ceiling. Israt sat near the electric glow of the battlefield map, his legs aching from the recent journey. Nobody said anything until Colonel Riks finally spoke.

"Do you know why this building –this casbah– was built? It's purpose?"

"No," Sadik replied, confused. "It's a relic from the pre-Shock. Who gives a shit?"

"Actually, it's neither post or pre-Shock construction. It was built during the worst of the climatic upheaval. It's a vault you see..."

"-A contemporary Pyramid of Giza –we've guessed that much– and?"

"The great pyramids were built over five thousand years ago when the mammoth still roamed the frozen tundra. Now it rains ash from methane fires in Siberia and never snows. Do you know what the plains of Giza look like now?"

Sadik shrugged. "I don't know mercenary-man, why don't you tell us?"

"Trees grow between the pyramids' limestone blocks. Runoff seeps through the cracks and pools

in the rubble. They're dissolving into what used to be desert. Two hundred years ago people thought the monuments would outlast what we collectively assumed to be civilization. The engineers who designed this casbah knew this and set about to perfect that original design. And in doing so, created pure genius." The colonel caressed the smooth walls then turned to face the General. "Have you found the caches in the superstructure yet?"

"What caches?"

With a working map inside his head, Colonel Riks led them down past the makeshift medical bays and officer billets. What used to be mistaken as an air duct turned out to be a narrow entrance to a spiral staircase. Down below the sound of artillery fire, the lower reaches of the Al'Tunis Casbah opened up into an expansive space. Rows of columns bordered rectangular pools that stretched into darkness. Black syrup filled each of the reservoirs, reflecting the light of their handheld torches. The liquid lacked even the faintest ripple.

"So quiet," someone said.

"A tomb," said another.

"There," Riks said, pointing to syphon pipes along the cavernous room's perimeter. "Do you see them."

This was the source of the casbah's immortality. Riks went on to describe that the liquid was a type of 'ferro-fluid' infused with smarts that allowed the iron-like goo to form shapes and structures on command. Pumped from the undercroft, the building re-distributed the matter to the structure's damaged areas. Like blood pumped to an appendage, the casbah healed itself. It was a

living organ designed to endure. To Israt, the technology was nothing more than magic; the colonel's descriptions failed him. He could only stand back while the Centipedes attempted to absorb Rik's esoteric explanations.

"As matter is lost, the casbah's programming re-assigns each particle to a pre-organized location. It's a feat of Crimean meta-magnetics that researchers are still attempting to reverse engineer. Most of the know-how has been lost. This place —this casbah— is an artifact, a relic." He had an undeniable passion for this fortress, as if he was an aged hajji finally arriving in Mecca. Israt failed to conjure the appreciation for the wizardry until Riks decided to perform a demonstration.

"Implanted in both my forearms are synchronizers, encoders, and broadcast amplifiers that interpret field data from my cerebrum." Riks pointed to each of his arms, sketching out subdermal hardware with a finger. "Using transcoders, I am able to form these particulates in any way my imagination sees fit."

The Centipedes said nothing.

Riks extended his arms and rotated his wrists as if to activate it. A slight hum filled the quiet. In a choreography of gesture and thought, the mercenary conjured the casbah's inner engines. The effects were subtle at first, just a slow simmer from a nearby reservoir. Then with a spasm, the black liquid formed a field of spikes pointing at all angles. The black shapes spun and rotated like chaotic carousels of interlocking gears. With a clap of his hands, Riks let the fluid fall back into the pools. Seconds later, the liquid was calm, almost solid.

"Each magnetic sub-province -micro-scopic in scale- is commanded to orient in unnatural ways based on a few lines of fractal code and eddy currents. Using combinations of canonical archetypes, complexity is instantaneous. Any shape I can conjure in my mind, I can build in multitudes. Within reason of course."

"So Alkonost has brought us a magician," someone quipped.

Riks ignored the slight. The others remained quiet. He proceeded with his manipulations. Again, the shapes materialized from the pools. So dark and shiny, detail stayed hidden by the glint of ambient light. Chthonic demons mixed in with the tangle of geometric tentacles, animated as if alive. With a punch, the mercenary launched a blob out of the pools and onto the floor. Dismissing the amorphous army in the reservoirs, Riks focused on the mass in front of him.

"Implementing a combination of pixelation and surface tension, any type of solid or shape can be created: from a magazine of rifle rounds..." Riks tapped a few fingers and created a floor of bullets. "To something more close quarters..." Another clench of his fist and the bullets reconstituted into survival knives, complete with textured handles. "Go on. Pick one up."

Kneeling down, General Sadik grabbed one of the hundred or so blades. He reeled as he rubbed a finger along its edge. A drop of blood curled around his forefinger. He wielded it about to insure its appropriate weight, his lower lip pushed out in admiration.

"Impressive."

His lieutenants reached down to grab one of the knives for themselves. All inspected Riks'

instantaneous handiwork. Like General -Sadik, they verified its functionality with a few mid-air slashes and stab motions.

"And what can be created, can easily be destroyed," Riks said, flicking his fingertips. Like a death ray, the knives dissolved into black ash. "Dust to dust."

"Right under our feet, literally. Al'Tunis Casbah's regenerative powers were known to us – obviously that's why we chose this as our strong point– but its mechanics, we were woefully and ignorantly unaware," the general said with mocking self-deprecation. "But it doesn't really help us now does it, Alkonost man?"

"Its uses are only limited by your imagination," Riks countered, a slight insult that wasn't lost on Sadik. "But I would say you have more pressing problem at the moment then how to deploy all this as an offensive weapon."

"Pressing problems, you say? Out with it. Go on then. Let's hear it."

Riks reached down and picked up a handful of the pitch-black sand. Meandering about, he stepped in front of Israt. He raised his palm to his mouth and blew a cloud of the particulates into the leper's face. Gasps and protests erupted from the Centipedes as the Israt fell to his knees, coughing and blinded.

"Why did you do that?"

"Not to tell you how to command your army," Riks replied, " but you might find yourself making more progress against your enemies if you purged their spies from your ranks."

Israt could see nothing. The goo had sealed over his eyes. No matter how much he rubbed and scratched, his vision failed. "I'm blind!" The

reformed material acted like opaque contact lenses. Sealing and squeezing his eyeballs, his orbits rang with pain. "I'm blind, goddamnit. Blind!"

"How do you know this Israt, this Berber?" Riks asked Sadik.

"Israt is our clandestine agent, a native of the Maghreb. He knows Carthage. He knows our enemy," Sadik explained. "Why are you accusing him?"

"The man was timing Vandal patrols on the battlefield. He knew their movements. When we came across a field execution of your comrades he stopped me when I tried to interdict,"

"No!" Israt screamed. "Liar!"

"So, he just stumbled up to the trench and solicited his service. Is that how you found him?" Riks inquired.

"We rescued him from a slave facility. He was a pressganger working the oxygen generation unit near Ras Tabia. A technocrat of the former regime—or so he said—or so we were led to believe," Sadik explained.

Israt felt someone grab his arm. A knife raked his wrist. With a flick of the blade, his chronometer band was cut away. He reached up blindly to snatch it back but was unsuccessful.

"You were no doubt meant to find him. This device he wears, test it. You'll find it's a two-way transceiver. Somehow your adversaries have insinuated this double agent into your stable of spies."

"Please," Israt gasped. "I can explain. It's not like he says."

Sadik wouldn't listen. The mercenary's accusations had convinced the general, and it was hard to argue otherwise.

#

Besides daily deliveries of field rations through a slot in the door, Israt saw and heard no one. Deep inside the Al'Tunis Casbah, everything was quiet. Oddly, no one had bothered to interrogate him. Others were incarcerated around him, or so he suspected. He remembered counting ten other cells when they'd brought him here. Whether each was occupied, he wasn't sure. Shouts under the steel door or into the air ducts received no response. Random clangs and the slamming of doors broke the stillness, but little else. He even found himself shouting into the latrine hole thinking the plumbing might somehow be connected to an adjacent cell.

His sight had been quickly restored after his interment. Where exactly the mystery fluid had disappeared, he couldn't know. Like a drug maybe, he may have pissed or sweated it out. Phantom twitches and spasms just under the skin hinted at a residue, but the numbing leprosy clouded sensation.

Weeks passed. He wondered what gains —if any— the Centipedes had made using their new 'secret weapon.' He'd had a hunch about Colonel Riks on the beach. Israt was sloppy, the mercenary's battlefield sense too preternatural; he'd revealed himself. His discovery was more an indictment of the Centipedes. That they hadn't sussed out "Israt the spy" marked their incompetence. No wonder their invasion stalled.

Half-asleep, the pops of small arms fire stirred him awake. Crawling up to the door slot, he struggled to peer through the sliver of light. He shouted and pounded with his fists. After minutes

of quiet, someone unlocked and opened the door. The hall light stung his eyes.

"Out! Out!"

He scrambled into the hall. Two Centipede guards lay face down near the cell block door, blood pooling beneath them. It was a breakout, three other prisoners altogether, one with a pistol and two others with a truncheon. As his eyes cleared, he noticed the prisoners were also lepers, some worse than himself. The leader was so afflicted his face barely resembled a human's, hands and legs misshapen.

"You're Israt?"

He nodded.

"Do you know your way down to Lake Tunis?" the leader asked.

"Yes, but who are you?"

"My name is Hazem. I worked as a translator at a listening post up at Gammarth. Once the Centipedes discovered I was mis-translating transmissions, they threw me in here."

Israt wasn't alone in his subterfuge, apparently. "You are all lepers?"

They nodded.

"The breathing units. The disease lives in the oxygen generators," Hazem the leader described.

"I know," replied Israt. "I remember developing the sanitization procedure. This should no longer be happening."

A few shrugged, offering no explanation.

"I can get us outside the casbah, but we don't know the way into no man's land," said Hazem. "We need you to lead us beyond the tripwires."

"What then?" Israt asked.

"Get our old jobs back?" another offered.

"But the Vandals will suspect us."

"We'll worry about that later. If we stay here any longer, they'll execute us," Hazem explained. "I overheard the guards. They have plans. We're not long for this world."

They crawled into a nearby ventilator shaft and ambled their way through a labyrinth of ducts to an exchanger near the surface. Israt recommended they wear the fallen Centipedes uniforms, but Hazem argued against it. The only thing they took besides their prisoner robes were the guards' two enrichment masks and filters. They would have to pass them back and forth and take turns.

Breaking through an air seal, they emerged into the Carthage night. A few hundred meters behind them, the silhouette of Al'Tunis Casbah glimmered in the smolder of nearby gas fires.

"Where to, Berber?"

"There's an auxiliary path near the coast along La Goulette, a ruined warren of the old city. Lots of stagnant water. Malaria. Dengue. All that. Lost of disease. No one dares tread there," Israt explained.

"Perfect."

The expected Centipede patrols failed to materialize. Rarely had Israt seen the battlefield so desolate. Booby traps and snipers had become the ersatz front line. The tactics of battle stasis, General Sadik had apparently decided to accelerate the tactic. A few shadows appeared then disappeared, but nothing more.

"Too goddamn quiet," Israt whispered.

"Don't look a gift horse in the mouth, Berber. Just keep walking."

They slogged through the decay of the lower city's swampy streets. The heat grew intense. Sharing enrichment masks became burdensome; each

step was exhaustive agony. Near the lake the escapees paused. The ever-present haze obscured the far shoreline. Protests erupted when Israt recommended they wade out to stay clear of the razor wire and mines.

The sound of retching cycled in with the coughs and gasps as they eased into the milky water. With the heat and stagnant air, the egg stink was particularly oppressive. Those with the masks were more reluctant to share. Israt tried to ignore his followers' complaints. Flemish voices shouted at them from the far shore. In the pre-dawn gloom, the pale European warriors were barely visible. Holding up their hands, Israt and the other escapees trudged ashore as the Vandals frisked their robes one-by-one. Discovering Hazem's pistol, they removed it from his waist belt.

Descended from the King Van Dallen of Rotterdam, the 'Vandals' —as they had been nicknamed— were invaders themselves prior to the Centipede's unwelcome arrival. Heading south, they'd sought better salvage in the Maghreb but had proven themselves efficient slavers as well. Unlike most barbarians, the Vandals pressganged the Earth's remaining technocrats. The world was too sparse to dispose of usable know-how.

Parley was always the first order, executions came later if need be. Israt remembered the abductions from his village. The Vandals were adept at assessing their captives' aptitudes. Those with needed skills were segregated, everyone else was given a shovel. Separated families never saw each other again.

"I'm Israt. We escaped Al'Tunis Casbah. Hazem and I have worked for the warchiefs as agents."

Hazem nodded as the others remained silent.

Weary but receptive, the Vandals conversed in their native tongue then escorted the ragtag lepers inland. Beyond the shore, the foul air dissipated with the toxic gases. The skeletal remains of the Hotel Africa loomed in the haze. Glass ejecta dusted the streets below, the remnants of its once-majestic glass facade. They continued west. Passing a cordon of warrior vanguards, they were led into more ruins, down into a tunnel, and past an air wall.

The Catacombs of Tunis, a time capsule, the warrens had managed to weather the climactic decay above. Israt had been in the tunnels before, but never this deep. The Vandals were leading them into the chieftains sanctoms. Always a secret, Israt had pondered its exact location. No doubt the Centipedes had wondered as well.

Deep under the earth, this place offered a vast command bunker for Old Carthage's defenders. Like an ant colony, a maze of tunnels perforated the underworld, claustrophobia morphing into another kind of fear. Ahead, an underground pavillion opened up into a chapel. Far from the map rooms, armories, and radio alcoves, the place was quiet as a tomb.

War Chief Gregor was impressively tall as were his two lieutenants. Ritualistically scarred, geometric patterns marked their torsos with clan iconography. With a nod, Gregor dismissed their escorts. In the broken tongue of the Maghreb, one of Gregor's lieutenants spoke.

"Israt the leper, you have returned to us, and here we thought we'd lost you forever."

"There were..." he paused trying to find the right word, "complications."

"You were found out?"

"Yes, by an outsider, an Alkonost mercenary," Israt explained. "The Centipedes were predictable in their thinking. The stalemate had made them less vigilant; they questioned little. But this Colonel Riks, he..."

"—How many?" Gregor interrupted. His baritone filling the domed chamber.

"How many? I don't understand," Israt replied.

"Alkonost reinforcements, the mercenaries, how many?"

"One, sir. One soldier."

Gregor paused, shaking his head. "Just one?"

"That's it... that's all. Just one."

Gregor started to laugh. In shock, Israt stood silent, wondering what was going to become of him. After the outburst, the Vandal war chief turned to the other escapees.

"And what about your friends here?" Gregor inquired.

Blackness.

Like before, a curtain fell over his eyes, blinding him. He grabbed his face, let out a scream, then dropped to his knees. He wasn't alone. The other escapees let out shrill shrieks as well. But these were shrieks of pain. He heard the Vandals say something. Startled whispers welled into alarm.

Before they said anything more, Gregor and his lieutenants broke into shouts. A whoosh of motion. Footsteps on sandy floors morphed into squishy liquid sounds. The men's hollering warped into grunts. Something was happening and quickly. Wet slicing sounds accompanied a push of wind. More groans and cries. Israt stayed still, afraid to move. Screams of pain mixed with gurgles as the slicing persisted. A shout for help ceased

suddenly. A sweaty body crawled over him. He scrambled along the floor to get out of its way. A hollow thud followed a fleshy slap on stone, then another slap. More dying gurgles then silence.

"Assassin," a voice said quietly.

Another series of slices and the voice said no more. Like the sound of a quiet flume, liquid burbled around him as if collecting into a common pool. Expecting dampness, Israt felt nothing. Not knowing what else to do, he kneeled on the ground and waited. After what felt like a good portion of an hour, but was no more than a minute or two, his vision returned.

"Stand up, Berber."

Israt did as asked. Colonel Riks stood in front of him holding a kind of javelin. The weapon was black. Fractal spikes erupted then retracted as if the spear was a writhing sea creature, desperate to return to the ocean. Israt looked around the chamber. The maimed bodies of the three Vandal commanders percolated blood out over the floor. The fellow leper escapees lay dead a few meters away.

"Where's Hazem?"

"There never was a Hazem," Riks said. With a pinky flick of his hand, a blob of ferro-fluid leapt from the spear onto the mercenary's face. The bits of matter spread out and bubbled, giving his skin the appearance of leprosy. With a finger, he dabbed it away.

"You used it as a disguise."

"—And a weapon," Riks smirked, jostling his javelin.

"The escape?"

"Staged for your benefit to bring me here, to cut off the head of the snake, as it were."

"And what of them?" Israt asked, turning towards the bodies of their fellow escapees.

"They never had your disease. Introduced into their food, the particulates dispersed to create the illusion of blight. I had to make it look authentic. With my command, the matter condensed inside their blood vessels and they died of stroke. The enemy prisoners were too much of a liability."

"You could have done the same to me. Why not?"

"You're going to get me out of here."

Israt wasn't so sure. "After we escape the catacombs –if we escape the catacombs– what then? I'm a turncoat. General Sadik won't just lock me up, he'll execute me."

"There's going to be a new commander at the Al'Tunis Casbah. I'll insure no harm comes to you," Riks said.

Israt shook his head in disbelief. "Who?"

"Me."

"You? An Alkonost officer commanding Centipedes. One man. How?" Israt couldn't help but snicker. Colonel Riks bravado was uncanny. He had to respect him, as absurd of a notion as it was.

"The ferro fluid –or ferro particles rather– have dispersed through the casbah's water supply. With a flick of my wrist, I can reduce the Centipede ranks to no more than..." Riks nodded towards the two fallen escapees.

"You've enslaved them, haven't you? Press-ganged them."

"The Vandals are deft when it comes to such tactics. We can learn much from them. Never underestimate your adversaries, or your allies."

[NB] BIN WALID

He hadn't injured the child, just a twist of the arm. More startled than hurt, the girl pulled away and rubbed her elbow with a wary eye. Mohammed flashed her mother an apologetic glance: a silent look of frustration. He touched his own arm and felt the heat building inside the monofilament weaves. The twitching always grew worse as the day wore on. Pausing, he studied his thumb and watched it rotate around its socket uncontrollably. Its obscene twitches defied his humanity. Today the tremors were worse. He tried again, but the palsy was too uncontrollable.

"Maybe tomorrow," he told the mother.

The woman said nothing, shuffling her daughter out the doorway and into the bright sun. Mohammed reached up and pulled the harness from its hook, wrapped his malfunctioning appendage, then cinched it tight. Like an animal in a trap, the arm fought the restraints, whirring and writhing as if it had a mind of its own. With his quiet arm, he lit a cigarette and walked outside into the Arabian glare.

The saffron tide of an anoxic haze clung to the valley below. A dead zone had drifted from the sea, typical this time of year. Besides the herdsman and their goats, a flock of sparrows had wandered up the mountainside to escape the threat. Mohammed sat on a low wall and watched the busy creatures crowd a veiny tree as he finished his smoke. The hardscrabble village he now called home was hardly that; just a few teetering tower houses huddled together.

"Doctor?" a small voice broke the silence.

He was maybe eight or ten, Mohammed was unsure. The Earth aged children in peculiar ways. He turned to look at the boy, haloed by the sun behind him. A hypnotic pulse overwhelmed Mohammed's right eye. The strobing building to a saturated crescendo as the amplifiers went into runaway. A burst of pain flooded his macula. Quickly, he pulled out his patch to subdue the artificial organ.

"Why did you hurt my sister?"

"It was an accident. My left arm," Mohammed lifted his sling, "malfunctions when it gets overworked."

The boy approached cautiously, more curious than fearful. He sat down next to the doctor and idly swung his legs, kicking up dust. Saying nothing, he studied Mohammed's mechanical arms. Since arriving, the villagers had kept their distance. Overwhelmed by a recent plague, however, they were forced into overcoming their superstitions.

"Are you cursed by Allah? Why do demons possess you?"

Mohammed smirked and took a last puff of his hand rolled cigarette. "Cursed by Allah? Perhaps. But, no, I'm not possessed by any demon." He pointed to an ancient open-bed truck with a graphite finger. "Do you see that lorry over there?"

"Yes. It is my Uncle Abudllah's"

The Mercedes was the village's only working vehicle, an antiquity of the old world built before the Post-Industrial Shock. Meticulously kept running, the boy's uncle was more a clockmaker than a mechanic. Despite his

preternatural abilities with a wrench, no amount of repair could sustain it.

"My arm is like that truck. Built long ago, the means to repair it no longer remain. One day it will cease to run."

"What will happen to it?" He gazed at the arm. "To you?"

Mohammed had long stopped asking such questions. His arms —woven into synthetic control fibers— were patched into his nervous system and mounted to an interior alloy scaffold. Linked to his artificial ocular organ, the system could not be removed without leaving him an invalid. To live with his self-inflicted disability had been a price he was willing to take for his passion.

Resurrecting the lost arts, Mohammed had once performed grueling and exotic surgeries long gone from the world. Neural reconstruction, reattachments, splice and grafting, they were like medicinal artifacts. But as the arms —refurbished relics themselves— started to malfunction, small twitches began. But that was enough to end his endeavors. He'd fallen out of favor with the caliphate's sheiks quickly thereafter. Desperate to regain his station, he'd eventually resorted to blasphemy. A crime against God, and for eighteen years, he'd been paying the price.

"I don't know," Mohammed shrugged. "Allah will have mercy on me, insh'allah."

The boy, satisfied with Mohammed's explanation sat silent.

"What's your name, boy?"

"Fareed."

"Fareed. In the morning, my arm is more quiet, cooler, steady as a rock. I will immunize your

sister then. The plague won't come back. I promise."

Mohammed went back inside his spartan office as the heavy thumps of a rotorcraft approached. A blast of dust engulfed his cramped chambers, knocking boxes of medical supplies into pixelated piles of white. Rushing outside, vortices danced around him as the vehicle descended and landed. A contingent of caliphate mercenaries poured out and secured the landing zone. Save a few disoriented elders, there was little need for such a show of force. As the quadrotors slowed to a halt, a thin tall sheik stepped down the gangway and approached. His thobe was immaculately white; his red-and white khafiya worn in the stylish chic of Al Fadah Madina. He extended his hand.

"Dr. Mohammed Abdul-Aziz, I presume," the man winked. "Or however that old quote goes."

"Walid?" Mohammed uttered, amazed. He embraced the man and lightly kissed both of his cheeks. "How...why are you here?"

"How long has it been, good friend?" Walid replied, ignoring his question.

"Long." Mohammed paused. "So very long. Come inside. Have tea."

With a soft smile, he led his old colleague into the tower house and up to his apartment. Lighting a small butane stove, he watched as Walid silently pace his small living area, taking in his surroundings. Afternoon sunlight filtered through the stained glass transoms, dappling the room in color. From a nearby endtable, the sheik picked up a Jambiya —the tribal dagger of Arabia Felix— and idly pulled the blade in and out of its sheath. Pouring frothy sweetened tea into a cup, Mohammed handed it to his guest. Walid set the knife down

and nodded in thanks as he reached for the steaming beverage. Minutes passed until Mohammed finally broke the quiet.

"How was your trip?" he asked, awkwardly.

"There was an undamped harmonic on decent. Lots of turbulence in the liftpod. Something about a oceanic cyclone affecting the elevator's filament anchor. Chaotic updrafts or some such thing. Nothing a little dramamine couldn't fix."

"I see," Mohammed said. "Have you been to the surface before? I can't remember."

"Hajj. Twice. Nothing more. Once when I was young, and another time when I was an adult. After a week or two, I found myself becoming nauseous. The increased gravity or the unpredictable atmospheric variation –whatever it is– it leaves me weak." With a refined grace, Walid crossed his legs and took a seat on bedouin floor cushions along the wall.

"You eventually get used to it." Mohammed hesitated then built the courage to finally ask. "If I may, is there news of my wives? my children?"

Walid nodded. "Yes. But I know very little. They're kept in another toroid. The children have children now. No one has remarried. They were all incredibly loyal to you."

"Are they being treated well?"

"Your contributions to Al Fadah Madina and its physiological archives are without precedent in the caliphate. Despite your crime, your legacy is honored."

Mohammed smiled to himself. Dying to know more, but not wanting to beg, he tried to satisfy himself with the paltry slivers of information.

"And how is your work?"

"I've a new archivist," Walid said, gazing out the open window at the mountains beyond. "A former combat medic from Nova Byzantiums' territorial army, a centipede. On his last reconnoiter he was able to find a vial of simian smallpox and equatorial Marburg-"

"-Allah Akbar. And they allowed you to have it?"

Walid paused then spoke. "Well, it's technically not a weapon and if labelled properly..."

"-Technicalities, loopholes, that sort of thing. I see. There's always ways, I suppose," Mohammed interrupted. "Walid, I don't mean to be rude, but again, why are you here? I can't imagine it has to do with your desire to visit this particular desperate corner of the caliphate's on-world frontier."

"Yes. The business at hand," Walid said, setting his tea cup down. "You see, there's been an appeal regarding your case in our toroid's sharia court."

Thinking the worst, Mohammed turned away and gazed at the floor. Despite the desert heat, a cold sweat tickled his spine. Trying to speak, his mouth went dry as a stutter turned his words to babble.

"No," Walid extended a calming hand. "It's not like that. Please relax."

Mohammed sighed.

"Al Fadah Madina's medical guild has petitioned Caliph Sheik Abdul-Aziz bin Faisal bin Rahim Al-Khafji—the new caliph—for mercy on your behalf," Walid continued. "It seems there's been a political situation which has proved serendipitous, and we've decided to take advantage. I am here as the court's messenger."

Mohammed was relieved. "What is the message?"

"Your left arm is malfunctioning, correct?" Walid pointed to his sling. "A predictable eventuality with such fragile technology, but I don't have to tell you that. How is your right arm?"

Confused, Mohammed answered. "Steady enough. About twice a month or so it spasms and I lose control." He held up the artificial arm and flexed its electroactive polymer muscles. "What's this have to do with my punishment?"

"At the moment Holy Mecca is without a headsman, and with your knowledge of anatomy, along with your strength and control—as ephemeral as it may be—you're a perfect candidate. The caliph has promised your repatriation to Al Fadah Medina if you accept."

A long pause, a minute or more, he couldn't tell. Mohammed's stomach clenched, he tasted bile. "If I accept," he repeated at last. Such a proposition defied his hippocratic oath. An offense. Doctors did not—could not—do such things as a matter of principle. "So, the caliph wants me to be his executioner then."

"—Allah's executioner," Walid corrected.

Mohammed paced the small apartment. Such a retuning of his current sentence, for a crime many on Al Fadah Madina had assuredly forgotten, seemed bitterly ironic. But perhaps that was the point. The sharia courts had found a cruel twist, a way to accelerate his punishment, shorter but more excruciating.

He stopped to gaze out the window at the windswept village. The superstitious tribesmen had never taken to him. Like most, scratching out a living this close to the Khal Al Alam—The Empty World—, they too had retreated into humanity's old

ways of thinking. Despite his efforts, his condition would worsen with time. Then one day, when he could no longer offer the village medicine, they would cast him out.

"How much time do I have to think about it."

Walid shook his head.

"All right," Mohammed sighed. "I suppose I've no other choice."

#

The servitors washed the blood with a mechanical intensity, their eyes wide with an autopilot glaze. Indentured, they had turned over their bodies—and turned off their consciousness—to the caliphate in exchange for refuge. Mohammed could tell this group was treated better than most. They would most likely reawaken into intact bodies, unlike a few of their more unfortunate peers left crippled and disfigured. A few, victims of chronic heat exhaustion, awoke to the particular horror of brain damage.

But unlike servitors, he could not detach his mind from his visceral duty. Wide-eyed, he felt each beheading; each neck had a particular resistance, each skull a particular sound as it hit. He thought he would get used to it. A foolish notion. To be mindless through this ordeal... Mohammed had a particular envy.

Taking care, he wiped the crimson from the scimitar's chromium glimmer and sheathed his weapon. The afternoon sun had grown hot and humid. His face itched under his khafiyya, worn Al Quds style to hide his identity from the condemned. Agonizing minutes passed as he waited for the herky-jerky servitors to pick up the bifurcated remains. Mercifully, the call to prayer ended the day's executions. A few hajjis loitered around the

square, but most had left; their morbid curiosity sated. Unceremoniously, he walked into the muttawa's nearby bureau, washed, changed, and left via an underground passageway to pray at the Kaaba.

With the shifting of the rain belts, the deserts of western Arabia had transformed into nascent jungle and savannah. As custodians of Mecca, the orbital caliphate of Al Fadah Madina had retrofitted the Masjid al-Haram —The Holy Mosque— by building a protective black dome over the Kaaba. Instead of open air, hajjis were treated to a climate controlled coolness under holographic starscapes. Mecca's former governor, the Sauds, had built the city up for a desert world. A failure of foresight. Mecca was now humid and rain swollen, verdant and green, the color of Islam. Most of the kingdom's old buildings, including the Albraj al Bait clock tower, had eroded into monstrous rusted skeletons. Like sprouts of grass, the caliphate's alien construction sprang up from the Pre-Shock's ruins.

The Holy Mosque was nearly empty when Mohammed arrived. Just a few groups of pilgrims down from Al Fadah Medina performing umrah. His left arm's tremors had begun in earnest. Barely able to perform salah, he synched and slung his unruly arm for the walk home. Beyond the pale glimmer of the inner city, he wandered past the empty decay of a former apartment district. Taking a shortcut over the salt dunes of a forgotten desalination plant, he stopped to have a cigarette. A roar filled the air, the jump jets of another shuttle transitioning to hover mode. More and more arrived each day —exiles, outcasts, and the condemned— ferried up from the elevator's earthside terminus.

Walid had mentioned a political upheaval. Fratricide was common among the caliphate sheiks. With the ascendancy of the new caliph, a renewal of the policy had been decreed. Too sterile for such dirty work, Al Fadah Madina let its earthside province carry out the sentences. The end result was a noted increase in Mohammed's bloody toil. No one had told him how much longer this tenure would last. He only had hope it would be over soon. Smoking the last of his cigarette, he sat and leaned back into the salt to gaze skyward. Nearly asleep, he felt the drops of a thundershower.

Time to go.

A mile from his apartment block, he heard the echo of gunfire. Silver searchlights panned the twilight. He slowed his steps, crawling up a higher dune to gain vantage. The disturbance was coming from the matawwa's internment block. Riots were rare, but this sounded different. Shadows appeared over the salt drifts, coming towards him. Mohammed dropped to the ground and peered over a brine crest. Five prisoners scurried into the oncoming darkness, some limping, others stumbling, one holding the hand of another. Earth's increased gravity had a way with newly terrestrial.

Mohammed struggled with his one good eye to gain a better view. They wore orange prisoner jumpsuits. Nothing remarkable. Typical issue. A squad of Balkan mercenaries gave chase, but the escapees had too much of a lead. The security team stopped to aim their rifles. Red cyclopic eyes hovered in the night. The mercs toggled their infrared filters for targets but found nothing.

Speaking their slavic tongue, Mohammed inferred little from their conversations. They didn't seem worried. After a few minutes and radio calls, the

mercenaries wandered back to their post. He waited a few minutes, then stood and dusted himself off. The fugitives wouldn't get far. Outside Mecca's security cordon was wilderness. A few outposts — manned by the caliphate's hired guns— was all that kept the warlord fiefdoms and barbarians at bay. The Empty World would make quick work of their naive softness.

Wandering past the hotel district, Mohammed decided to take a shortcut through an overgrown garden. Surrounded by the dilapidated facades of mouldering hotel towers, the quad had been transformed. A vast fountain pool was now a wadi. Among the reeds, languid reptiles stirred. Malaria had made its way over from the Sahara with the monsoons. Each squeal of a mosquito gave him pause.

A break in the rain clouds gave way to the crescent moon. In the sky just north, the conjoined toroids of Al Fadah Medina twinkled as they rotated. A longing overtook him. He thought of the years and kilometers of blackness between him and his former home. He thought of his wives and children. Pinpricks of light crawled along the invisible horsehair tether, the elevator connecting the stellar caliphate to the dying Earth. He closed his eyes and imagined the whoosh of the liftpod. A luxury hajji pod perhaps, complete with hookah and apple-apple shisha.

"Soon. Insh'allah."

Whispers on the wind. He heard the echo of a muffled conversation. Tucking himself behind a date palm, he tried to conceal himself. He waited, cupping his ears to determine the voices' direction. Weaving through spines of a succulent patch, he found cover under a low wall of a ruined

cafe. Above, on the third floor, orange shapes paced nervously along a cement porch.

"What now?"

"If the maps were right, three kilometers east should be an old subway tunnel."

"What then?"

"We wait for daybreak."

"Daybreak, such an odd notion."

Their accents were heavy, an underprivileged caste. It had been too long for Mohammed to pick out the nuance. Camouflaged by the roar of veldt beetles, he ducked inside the hotel and made his way up a crumbing stairwell. Through a forest of cement pillars, near a pile of broken furniture, he saw them huddled. The escapees were making plans. Mohammed crept over to an overturned divan just out of sight. Using his finger, he pushed his glitchy eyeball into the socket. A pain shot through his skull as the spliced nerves went into feedback. Massive dilation turned the night into a temporary grainy monochrome.

What he saw should have disturbed him, but he'd a history with this type of thing. Each of the five exhibited injuries unique to medical experimentation. Like himself, several had implants that had since malfunctioned. One individual used crude sign language, his face nothing more than a collection of dead sensors with a siphon for eating. Another had two additional synthetic arms. Poorly grafted, they no longer worked and dangled useless. The other three had less overt trauma. Two looked in deteriorating health, jaundiced and thin with scabbing around their mouths. Along with their patchy hair, Mohammed guessed it was radiation exposure. A

chronic danger on Al Fadah Medina. The fifth prisoner gave Mohammed pause.

"Maybe we can sneak back. Hide among the hajjis. Or become a servitor."

"We're biographed. There's sensors everywhere in Mecca. The muttawa will know," another replied.

"We will leave. Take our chances beyond the Nejd, in the veldt. There's salvage there. I've been studying it. The caliphate's mercenaries rarely patrol that far," said the fifth.

"Majid can hardly walk! It would be impossible for him," protested the four-armed.

A horror overcame Mohammed. He recognized the fifth prisoner —the ringleader— but not because he'd seen the man before. Like looking at an old photograph, it was his face but decades younger. His crime incarnate stood before him. His shame. The last time he had seen the man, he'd been an infant, freshly born from an abed womb. The DNA tests soon sussed out the child's origins and Al Fadah Median's mujahideen had Mohammed arrested.

The clone was to be stashed in the Alhambra Toroid, utilized as a test subject for medical archiving. Mohammed had planned to keep his distance until the child had matured. Then he would reallocate the clone asset, use the body's arms, eyes, and nervous tissues to replace his failing appendages and implants. Keeping the remains of the cadaver in stasis, he had planned to harvest the remaining organs for old age. Researching Crimean regenerative technologies, he estimated he could prolong his life two-fold.

But his plan had failed; he'd been found out.

Deep in his heart, he knew it had been blasphemy; it had to be. He'd spent considerable time with the imams studying the Quran. From Surat

an-Nisa, one verse stuck in his head: "I will arouse in them desires, and I will command them so they will slit the ears of cattle, and I will command them so they will change the creation of Allah." The words of Satan. But it was not a cow – or any animal– Mohammed had cloned, but himself. A blasphemy and self-idolatry that had to be punished. After his exile sentence, Walid had offered to take the clone into his archive. Al Fadah Madina's sharia courts had agreed.

"How did they know?" asked one of the irradiated.

"Know what?" asked the clone.

"Our plans."

"To kill the sheik?"

The sick man nodded.

"There's a traitor among us," replied the four-armed.

"If it wasn't for the shiek, we would have been euthanized. He kept us alive."

"Are you defending him? Look what he did to Jibran," the four-armed pointed to the faceless wretch. Mohammed suspected they were talking about his friend Walid, but he couldn't be sure.

"Enough!" the clone shouted. "This isn't getting us anywhere. We need to move. If we leave now, we'll be at the edge of the city in a few hours, insh'allah."

The conversation stopped. The hum of an armored personnel carrier rose above the insect din. Shouts of soldiers. A magnesium flare filled the quad with a silver brightness. The five escapees scampered away from the flickering light like cockroaches. Mohammed craned his neck to have a look below. A fan of mercenaries approached, some

toggling sensors, others pointing at the hotel's crumbling facade. The prisoners had been tagged.

The excitement quickly dissipated as the chase moved on, the footsteps fading. Mohammed was left in quiet and darkness, alone except ghosts.

#

A brimstone fog had moved in from the Red Sea, starving the air of oxygen. The square had transformed into a claustrophobic curtain of white. No hajji spectators today. Mohammed wore his enrichment mask, his kafiya folded bedouin style. It was uncomfortable but necessary. The muttawa brought out another of Sheikh Abdul-Alim bin Rahim Al-Khafji's harem, part of the ongoing fratricide. Since Abdul-Alim was the caliph's brother, all of his concubines had to be put to the sword as was custom.

Mohammed's arm was especially troublesome today. Pushing his left arm into his chest, he tried to subdue it. Worse still, his other arm—his sword arm—was starting to mildly tremor. A byproduct of the dead zone perhaps. The muttawa took notice and asked him if he wanted to call it off, but he refused. Women were easier, their necks like lambs. If he could hold it together and avoid nicking the skull, one strike was all that was needed.

"Wali, could you remove her scarf," he asked a muttawa. "And pull her hair back."

"Yes, executioner."

The woman, in her early twenties, had submitted, her strength gone. Head slung, she'd been subdued by either opiates or the dead zone's anoxia. He asked the woman to repeat the Shahadah, but she did not reply. Mohammed gripped the scimitar tightly, then swung hard. A soft thump, and the

remains slid to the side. He quickly stepped back to avoid getting blood on his thobe, then waited for the servitors.

"Are we done?" he asked a muttawa.

"There are a few others. But if your arm is too..." the man gestured to his graphite sword hand.

"—It's fine," Mohammed replied, annoyed.

The man nodded then disappeared into the mists, reappearing after a few moments with the next prisoner. Not a woman but a man, and not just any man, but his clone. His face was bruised, his eye blackened. They had roughed him up. He'd grown a beard throughout his ordeal. Mohammed paused to look at him. How strange, he thought, such facial hair was for the pious, imams, mujahideen... He could never picture himself with one, until now.

The clone kneeled, his hands tied behind his back. Mohammed went through the pre-execution routine. Non-submissive, the clone held his head stoically and gazed about. Mohammed felt a strange pride, an inner dignity coupled with a brewing rage.

"Please, lower your head," he commanded softly.

The clone said nothing, his eyes fixed on Mohammed. His brow furrowed. He recognized him. A nearby muttawa urged him to get on with it, but Mohammed hesitated. Slowly, Mohammed pulled down his enrichment mask. Wincing from the atmosphere, he forced composure and let the clone gaze at him.

"Allah Akbar," the clone said at last. "Is it you?"

Mohammed did not answer.

"It is you. I had been told you were exiled, but..."

"Who told you?"

"The master sheik."

"Walid?"

The clone nodded.

"Who do you think I am?" Mohammed asked after a pause.

"You are my father. I was told you lived."

Despite the heat and itch, a cold filled Mohammed. He felt his sword arm twitch. The muttawa looked on nervously. Is that what this poor wretch had been told? He gazed at both of the clone's human hands. Jealousy surged; he could taste it. The defiance in the clone's unblemished eyes, eyes that may have been his own.

Allah had chosen an appropriate torment for Mohammed's blasphemy. Cast from the heavens and into this earthly hell, his punishments had concluded with a vengeful coincidence; God's will. He understood at long last. A bitter demon without redemption, this was his lot. Like a cannibal, he salivated for the humanity he had given up in this Faustian bargain. Tantalized but impotent, he wanted to scream.

"You are mistaken. I am not your father. Now, please."

"But -"

He nodded to the muttawa. Pushing his mask back onto his face, Mohammed stood back and took aim. The spasms disappeared completely. His sword arm steadied like a hydraulic claw. He lifted the sword and positioned it to strike.

"I have no sons. I have only daughters."

[NB] ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After graduating from Western Washington University with a degree in Physics and Optical Science, Matthew Rivett went on to receive his Masters at the University of Wyoming in Laramie. He returned to his hometown of Seattle, where he currently resides with his wife and daughter. For the past fifteen years, Matthew has worked as an aerospace research and development engineer for the Boeing Phantom Works in Seattle, specializing in radar and communications technology. In addition to physics, Matthew also has a keen interest in the sciences of paleontology, anthropology, and computer science. Besides technical writing for work, Matthew has been a writer of science fiction on-and-off for most of his life, and cites Gene Wolfe, Philip K. Dick, H. P. Lovecraft, and China MiévilleJ.G.Ballard as among his favorite authors and influences. In his off time, Matthew enjoys scuba diving, and on weekends he can usually be found exploring the cold green waters of the Puget Sound when not planning the next diving vacation to Hawaii. Nova Byzantium is his first novel.

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[CP] SUMMARY

Zara's mind has been re-wired to do away with sleep, a requirement for piloting mankind's first interstellar star ship. Her new brain is not without side-effects, however. Between consciousness and a semi-lucid state called 'drift-diving,' reality splinters. Amnesia and déjà vu become one, hours and days deleted. But Zara's memories are classified, and she is told she no longer has a 'need to know.'

After a mysterious agent propositions her for secrets in exchange for information about her missing father, a tempted Zara dismisses the notion. However when her flight status is unexpectedly revoked, dismay and resentment quickly changes her attitude... because this was not supposed to be the end.

Prophetic visions of floating jungles and sentient insects haunt her. An alien terminus? So real, it must be fate. Zara soon sets out into the byzantine world of Lacus Somniorum, the Moon's clandestine Lake of Dreams in search of answers, not only about her past, but also her improbable future.

[CP] CHAPTER ONE

The evol crouched in front of Zara's apartment window, hands knotted in a clawed fist, an eviscerated leporid at its feet. Hardwired by instinct, the creature felt compelled to display its sacrifice. Zara had never given its motivations much thought. Synthetically evolved from primates, devolved from humans, its lineage had blurred inside the silicon warrens of a cellular manipulator.

Zara imagined scientists dabbling with weaponized genetics, minds crawling with notional hybrids and their lethal promise. She wondered when the researchers had ultimately realized their creation was a failure, relegated to museums, or in the evols' case, a lunar menagerie. With such creations, they must not have been completely disappointed. Sipping a bulb of coffee, Zara continued to watch the animal from the safety of her cramped billet.

The Noctarium was like most lunar architecture, a retrofit of an earlier installation. Moon living was spartan, breathable air at a premium. Set up as a park—an oasis in the midst of the Lake's sterility—the lunar engineers had domed the crater with geodesics and filled it with manufactured soil, water, and botanical curiosities. Along its perimeter, they constructed a hotel, a 'natural' retreat for the moon-stationed homesick. But as the years stretched and Legion's mandate expanded, military necessity did away with such luxury, converting the complex over into a genetic arcology and legionnaire housing.

Unlike her neighbors, Zara rarely tinted the window. She enjoyed the Noctarium's weirdness, its Alice in Wonderland jungle complete with mammoth mushrooms, mutated oddities, and lunarized fauna decoupled from Earth's Darwinian gravity. The mash-up was unique: life recast. But the evols interested her the most, little bipeds with coal-black skin and large empty eyes.

She walked up to the glass. The side-effects of her medications caused her to list. The evol stood as well. Grabbing the ears of its prey, it dragged the carcass over to the window. It held the limp body up for Zara, its simian head slung in reverence or submission. After a minute, the evol dropped the coney to the loam and backed into the undergrowth. Zara lingered, hoping the creature would return.

Like a shock, her frontal lobe throbbed. She sat down. Her hands trembled as a migraine rang her cranium. To quell the deja-vu, the flight surgeons had prescribed a cocktail of anti-psychotics and a drug called Thialexol. A week had passed since her release but side affects persisted, headaches mostly. She had asked a Legion specialist about quitting the medications but was given a stern lecture about the risk of 'bleed' and acute paranoia.

Zara volunteered for the Pilot implant fully aware of its irreversible risks. An unproven technology and marginally deployable, bifurcating consciousness bred peculiar abnormalities. The line between sleep and wakefulness was more subjective, engineered in ways to avoid psychosis. The rewards outweighed the danger, however. After passing the program's physical and psych evaluation, she never looked back.

"Nice tattoo."

She hadn't heard him come in. After two years, Julian no longer knocked, much to Zara's chagrin. She sighed but didn't get up.

"I thought you knew."

"How would I know about that?" he said, pointing to her shoulder.

"I got it a few weeks before implant surgery, before Lagrange."

"What is it, a locust or a bug or something?" Julian asked, his face pinched with disapproval. "It's frightening, whatever it's supposed to be."

"A Chronophage, a time eater, the Corpus Clock in Cambridge, England."

"And what's so special about it?"

"It keeps relative time, always forward, seconds consumed in random increments." Zara slid up her robe.

"The Titan Program, I'm guessing that was the impetus?" Julian asked knowingly. "A bit of a cult, that bunch." He fell into a recliner and gazed out the window into the Noctarium. "What were you looking at when I came in?"

"An evol. He brings me gifts —dead things usually." Zara pointed at the flaccid leporid at the glass.

Julian stood for a closer look. "Creepy little bastards. I heard they engineered them for wet ops, assassinations, that kind of thing, but their cataphotes —their eyes— shine too brightly in the infrared. They weren't survivable." He approached her from behind, tugged her robe down, and kissed her shoulder. She shirked, pulling the robe back up and cinching the belt.

"Christ, Zara..."

"I need more time."

"More time?" Julian smirked and sat down. "Ironical. I don't know if you've checked the calendar, but we're running low on that commodity."

Her current mood was more than just a swing. Her excuses of chronic neuralgia were wearing thin. Julian grew frustrated. Once the Victoria broke free of Earth's gravity, time dilation and light years would accomplish what she could not bring herself to do.

"Soon... maybe."

Julian slumped in his seat. "I'm too old for this shit."

Zara threw up her hands. "What do you want me to say?"

"Give the truth a go."

She couldn't let Julian go just yet. "Since returning from Lagrange, I have these... ancient thoughts," Zara tried to explain. "I remember everything prior to the implant, but there's this huge time gap. We're talking years, not just an hour or a day."

"—The surgeons said that kind of thing would be normal," Julian said, "part of the after-effects, periodic episodes of temporal distortion or something—but you should have come around by now. Malik and Titan lied to you about the recovery."

Zara didn't have the energy to explain her ennui. It was impossible; she didn't speak the right language. Their relationship had stalled post-implant and nostalgia was proving inadequate. To stumble on was a futile exercise.

"Say something," Julian sighed.

"What do you want me to say? It's not clinical or chemical—or anything to do with all that head-shrinker crap; it's something else."

Julian moaned. "Look..." He crouched down next to her chair. "You're the first person to receive the Pilot implant; you've got no basis for comparison. We're talking frontier medicine."

Zara spent hours signing release forms, digesting the contract bylines as best she could before thumbing the authenticator. But ultimately she'd been lost, the mix of medical terminology and legalese hopelessly confused her. Strokes, hemorrhage, aneurisms, were all a possibility —she knew that— but her zeal blinded her to the risk. She would not be deterred. She had spent only a few weeks recovering at Lagrange, but each sluggish breath, each dilated heartbeat, seemed to span a millennium. Estranged, emotion was no longer hormonal, but horologic.

Zara stood and headed for the toilet. "I've got to meet my neurologist in an hour, and I need to calm this headache. We'll talk soon. I promise." She smiled wanly.

"Whatever." Julian got up to leave.

"I promise."

"Well when, then?"

"I've got drift-dive prep tomorrow, but later this week... drinks at Le Boudin?"

He sighed, impatient but acquiescent. "Fine. I'll be there."

She gave him a hug and a quick kiss. With a forced smile, he left, closing the door behind him. Ready for the shower, Zara started to shade the window but stopped when she noticed the evol peeking out from underneath a toadstool.

Earthshine cast a dim light over the nocturnal jungle. The evol's cataphotes glowed like a cat's, its retinal maze visible through corneal lenses. Zara's marveled at the intricate patterns.

Geometries emerged from the macular veins: a fractal network in starburst swirls; the bio-engineered structure betrayed a natural origin.

#

Zara danced around slimy puddles as she dashed along the Rue Apollo. The mist was heavy, the false sky overcast, concealing the geodesics' spans and the Earth's blue-white marble. She glanced at the central marquee and sifted through the glare of ticker streams of Trade news feeds to find the time.

"I'm Late."

Rain always fell in the Arc, even during the Moon's two weeks of darkness. Arcology engineers underestimated the dehumidifiers, forcing the system to run in perpetual deficit. The humidity had transformed the dome into a lunar version of Bangkok. Without a costly overhaul to its underpowered evaporators, the Arc's denizens resigned themselves to its muggy inconvenience.

She fought through the drenched claustrophobia of the post-shift bustle. A few more back alleys and she would be... where?

"Shit."

Human Interface Laboratories —or HIL— was in the Arc's northwest quadrant. Lost, she had gotten confused. HIL was a massive facility, a maze of tempest chambers and hermetic neuroscience bays, its electric blue logo and choreographed fountains were hard to miss.

"Pierre," she said, tapping her console. "I'm going to be a little late. I'm lost."

"No worries, lieutenant. I'm behind with some proposal work, playing catch-up..." His voice broke up. Solar flares. "... When you get here, I'll go over your current diagnosis. I've reviewed

your symptoms. I'm going to rework your medications to address those migraines and..."

"—Listen," Zara interrupted him, "I'm a bit turned around. Can you give me directions?"

"Two blocks south of the central marquee, on the border of the southeast and southwest quadrant, near the business park. You can't miss us."

"Are you sure? I'm in Little Saigon now. There was this noodle bar I used to stop at..." Zara trailed off, spinning on her heels.

"Tet Khmer or Old Siam?"

Zara shook her head. "I can't remember."

"No worries —Look, just head for the marquee, then call me."

She finally reached HIL after another embarrassing call to Pierre. The spartan lobby, with its low coaches and ambient blue, was a welcome relief. Zara's skin felt clammy from the sticky humidity outside. She dipped into her pill case and popped an alprazolam into her mouth. Waiting for Pierre, she headed for the reception's toilet.

After splashing her face with water, she ran a hand through her damp curls then looked into the mirror. Reeling from agnosia, her own physiognomy disturbed her, especially her eyes. Rings of black and sunken —easy enough to dismiss as exhaustion—she could not avoid the weirdness of her own hazel-eyed gloom. Inspecting her skin, she noticed more wrinkles, her cheeks and forehead textured with an unearned wisdom.

Pierre was waiting when she returned. An academic type, he was neat but awkwardly dressed, more a gangly boy than a man. She noticed the off-world melancholy in his sloe eyes and scrunched shoulders. Typical of civvies at the Lake, the

altered gravity, yearlong tours, and reconstituted convenience left its mark. Legionnaires were bound by sanction, but civilians could go home anytime. And for reasons Zara failed to understand, having that choice bred regrets.

Smiling, he shook Zara's hand and invited her up to his office. "Take a seat, please," he gestured to a recliner. The office was large and windowed, obsessively neat. "Just a point of disclosure, I'll be recording this session. Are you okay with that?"

Zara nodded.

"Good." Pierre sat down behind his uncluttered desk. "Look, Zara, we'll get to the medication fine-tuning in a bit." He minimized a monitor panel as he swiveled his high back around. "I reviewed your recovery history after the Pilot implant procedure—an authorized download from the Titan program to HIL—and Lagrange's medical reports are lacking significant detail, to say the least."

"Micro-gravity surgeons are cowboys, especially that crew up at Lagrange. Subtlety and detail aren't their forte, especially when it comes to the anatomy. I should know, I used to date a triage tech," Zara smirked.

Pierre flashed an uncomfortable smile then went on. "When I said they were lacking detail, what I meant to say was there wasn't any detail... days, weeks, all your charts are missing from the record."

"Blacked out?"

"No, that's usually documented, part of Titan's declassification procedure filed with the patient's case history. This is something else."

Zara said nothing.

"I've made a database request, but it's been denied. Legion's putting up a firewall –Look, Zara..." Pierre leaned closer, hands neatly folded on his desk. "HIL wants to treat you –make sure you're fit for your upcoming mission– but the Titan program's not giving us much to work with. So, if you could shed some light on your recovery..." "

"Sure, anything," Zara replied. "Why would Titan deny HIL access?"

"Operational security, that sort of thing, who knows?" Pierre tried to make light. "So let's continue, for our records." He pointed his pen at the stalk of optical and audio recorders near his terminal. "What was your first post-op memory?"

Zara thought about her recovery room at Lagrange. Through the pain, blurriness, tinnitus, and dysgeusia, she remembered its stainless aluminum seams, its pentagonal walls, and polished welds pocked with electromagnetic seals. She remembered waking up wrapped in the chrysalis suspensor, a typical zero-G medical berth. Its webbing swaddled her, allowing medical access to her from all angles, the tubes and wires burrowed in like parasites. A rainbow of sedatives numbed her from pain and warped perception.

"Hyperbolic paranoia."

Pierre shook his head, eyes pinched. "A bit of a catchall, that term... Tell me something specific. How did it manifest?"

Zara reached for a glass of water and took a sip. "The schism and reformation was part of the healing process –so they said– like setting a broken bone. If I improved quickly, they said I'd be ready for drift dive training in a few weeks.

But like a bad acid trip, it went on forever, it just went on and on..."

She remembered her head scans after neural isolation. Like a jail cell, they'd compartmentalized her cerebrum. Skeins of white membrane commingled with the cauliflowered nerves like tumors. Zara was horrified at first, but she eventually accepted the reality. This was the procedure after all; she'd signed up for it knowingly.

"So, you're not ready..."

"No," Zara smiled. "That's why I'm here. The recovery's side effects, they're persisting and I need an independent review."

"And the paranoia?"

"It started when they altered my sleep cycles, when I began to drift-dive," she explained. The term 'drift-dive' had originated from Cetacean science, cortical shifts in bi-hemispheric consciousness that allowed whales to breath and swim simultaneously and continuously. It was the impetus for the Pilot implant.

"I felt phantasms, all these living things around me."

'Ghosts' she called them, movement in her periphery, hazy outlines hovering in the recovery chamber. They spoke a garbled telepathy, a quasi-language filtered by the hiss of pump impellers. Imprisoned by a waking coma, her mind slipped and tumbled, raced then stopped. Somewhere in her vestigial cortex she knew they were just nurses and technicians, that they meant no harm.

"I thought I was dead, but I awoke, and as I awoke, I came up with elaborate and absurd conspiracies," Zara explained. "—Do you have

anything stronger?" she gestured to the glass of water.

"With your prescriptions, alcohol isn't such a great idea." Pierre unclasped his hands and gestured to a sideboard. "But I do have some chai. I get fresh Misai Kucing from the Javans in the Tour de Jardin."

"That will have to do."

From his terminal, he brought up a menu and activated a dispenser. A hiss of milky tea filled two cups as the brewing machine turned itself off. Pierre retrieved the Kucing then continued. "What was the nature of these conspiracies?"

"While in a coma, it was more fantastic. I thought I was a hybrid soul, part human/part ghost, catching angels before they fell into a demon underworld, a psychedelic Catcher in the Rye." Zara carefully sipped the steaming chai. "Legion worked as a recruiting station for the afterlife with Lagrange a spirit-world rendezvous. It wasn't like a Renaissance painting though. The angels appeared as butterflies. The demons were mechanical, microscopic robots with hyper-intelligence. All complete nonsense of course, but it felt so real."

"Hallucinations?"

"—Not hallucinations... more like fabrications, stream-of-conscious 'noise'. I never saw, heard, or felt anything; it was intangible dream stuff. As I healed, the paranoia morphed."

"Go on."

Zara explained the comings and goings of Titan's medical techs: the beady-eyed nurse with the roman nose —always accusing her of trying to escape— and the research associate —with his oversized goggles, gravity-free mop, and the spittle-laden

lisp— asking questions about her bathroom habits. As the Milton-esque visions faded into schizophrenic-style paranoia, Zara formulated less exotic conspiracies.

“Typical street person rantings...”

She suspected a plot by unionist insurgents, the mission for which she had volunteered being just a cover. Using the Pilot implant, she believed Legion and Legion Intelligence Services and Protocol —LISP— had brainwashed her as a double agent. Through some Pavlovian mnemonic, her handlers could remotely activate her via drift-dive. Infiltrated into unionists' circles, she would become the unknowing 'double agent.' Nonsense of course, but she couldn't extinguish the thoughts.

“I would speak to them, but no one spoke back. The silent treatment.”

Her recovery room was a prison, the orderlies, nurses, and doctors just jailers. With no way to quantify time, Zara was certain years had passed by instead of weeks.

“How did you sleep?”

“I didn't, at least it didn't feel like sleep. They say that's normal in the beginning. Since there's no day or night at Lagrange, I couldn't account for time.”

“Watches, clocks...?”

“Deactivated, removed. I don't remember the reason. They'd mentioned something about 'intercalary dysfunction,' whatever the hell that meant.”

“Did you ever get violent?”

Zara paused, holding the bulbous cup with both hands. “Once... but I don't remember any of it. I may've been dreaming.”

"I see." Pierre was quiet, leaning back in his chair, his fingers arched in a Namaste.

The Lake attracted types like Pierre, misfit academics probing inner space in the remoteness of outer space. Her case interested him; she could tell. HIL pioneered Pilot implant research. The lab's chief scientist Akira Katsuhiko protested Legion's weaponization of the embryonic technology, but his warnings went unheeded. His work was under Legion contract; they owned the rights to the institute's research.

When Zara approached HIL for independent review, Pierre exploited the newly found loophole, a backdoor into Legion's controversial application of his institute's science. Zara was free to seek an independent professional opinion according to Legion provisos, and much to the Malik and the Titan program's chagrin, she approached HIL's neuroscience division.

"One of the biggest dangers with bihemispheric re-introduction is schizophrenia, the phenomena we call 'bleed.' The hemorrhage scrambles synaptic associations. The crosstalk confuses the brains' conscious rhythm. When the wounds are raw 'bleed' occurs as expected. The paranoia is intense. But it gets better as you heal. Sometimes the wounds tear, and the paranoia seeps through the newly created membranes."

"They informed me about the risk," Zara admitted. "It was in the disclosure and release paperwork."

"Legion isn't privy to everything we learned during Dr Katshurio's research. The contract language didn't require the release of all our proprietary data," Pierre added.

"And what about these headaches?"

"We can give you something for that." Pierre started to key in a prescription.

Out of the Arc's swampy heat, her body re-acclimatized to HIL's chilly climate control. She let her eyes close, soothed by the HVAC hum and Pierre's deliberate keystrokes. The throb of her migraine started to fade with the cool air.

"I think we're about done for this session," Pierre said, a smile creasing his thin lips. He brought up a terminal panel and switched off the recorder. "When's your launch date?"

"The next time the sun rises," Zara said quixotically.

Pierre's brow wrinkled.

"The next lunation. Thirty-five civilian days from now."

"I see," he said, a gaucheness to his reply. "Do you need a ride back to the Noctarium? My carryall is in the garage. It should be fully charged by now."

"It's a long drive, and I need to get something to eat. I'll be okay. I know my way back." She got up. "You mentioned a noodle place..."

"On the Rue Mer de Froid, there's a Mekong café near Airlock B. The Tet Khmer. Their Mì bò viên is terrific. I could join you if you like, a little outside of HIL client protocol, but..." Pierre offered.

"—I don't want to trouble you," Zara said, stepping into the elevator. "Next week?"

"Same time." Pierre forced a smile.

"Thanks for the..."

The door closed.

#

The noodle café was typical for the Arc, a mixed crowd of civilian contractors peppered with

legionaries. Zara shouldered past the outer dining area to the back bar. Steam rolled up from simmering pots, the kitchen shouts inaudible above the oil sizzle.

Zara ordered Phở from an overworked servitor, sat down, and stirred a handful of beansprouts into the broth. Above, a drowned out monitor streamed the news. Zara gazed absently forward. After a few squirts of hot sauce, she poked at the noodles, draping them over her soup spoon with a pair of bamboo chopsticks. She wasn't hungry anymore, her appetite stolen by sedatives and analgesics.

"What do you think?" said the man sitting next to her. "What's Trade going to do about Guangzhou's water strike?"

"What?" Zara mumbled, annoyed.

She hadn't noticed him sit down. He wasn't the typical Moon rat. He wore a tie and slacks, some high-caliber civilian up from the Well, a wayfarer.

"It looks like they're following through with their threats of industrial action," he said, gesturing at the dangling screen next to the menu.

Zara squinted at the news, a static-filled wash of Molotov fire and Kevlar-plated police. A rock-throwing mob of unionists had barricaded themselves inside a water-plant threatening to poison the city's premium supply with bacterium if their demands weren't met.

"The drought's bad there. The strikes are spreading, hundreds of them," the wayfarer carried on.

Zara nodded then went back to stirring her soup; she was in no mood.

Wayfarers were a lonely set, the Moon's low-gravity culture amplifying their homesickness. Lake dwellers didn't want to hear a neophyte's observations about the re-hydrated food, lunar toilets, and airlock protocol –especially Zara – especially now. The novelty of lunar living had lost its shine years ago.

"Do you think Trade's going to call in Legion?"

She shrugged. Zara wore her flight suit and rank livery –as was Legion protocol– and was easily identifiable as a flight officer. She became uneasily aware of her lack of anonymity. Alone and easy to spot, a nascent paranoia stirred. She feared relapse.

Zara tried to eat a little, but the taste was off, most likely a side effect of Thialexol. She had emerged from Titan's recovery bay having shed seven ill-afforded kilos. Julian had called her 'gaunt' and 'emaciated,' a fashion style he had boorishly dubbed 'Dachau chic.' The reconstituted food at Lagrange tasted awful, but it was calorie paste –it was supposed to taste awful. Now all food tasted bland, tainted with an odd metallic aftertaste. Another Pilot side-affect, the implant debased her pleasure zones. It certainly would explain her anemic libido.

"You seem tired. Do you pull long shifts up here?"

She didn't answer, keeping eyes forward.

"You're a lieutenant, right?"

"–I'm sorry," she said, turning towards him. The wayfarer was taller than her, handsome in a lanky androgynous way. His clear blue eyes evinced a salesman's insincerity. "I'm a bit preoccupied at the moment, not all that good for conversation. So, if you'll excuse me."

"Preoccupied...I see." He turned back to the news, face askance.

Zara looked at him, incensed. Entitled bastard, she was about to tell him where to stick his presumption when she tapped the pay sensor and left.

The lunar rain showered the street with its giant droplets. Zara navigated through soggy arcades and crowded alleyways looking for Airlock B and the eastbound trams. Obscured by mist, the Arc's central strut and marquee offered little bearing.

A lone sign reoriented her, but when she arrived at the airlock, the portal glowed with yellow hash, the entrance closed for construction; she would have to find another way home. Doubling back, she noticed him. He wore a trench coat and mist-haloed fedora. The wayfarer approached her. He leered impassively. Anxious, she flashed to the dreadful days in Lagrange's recovery chamber.

Most likely a union agent —a plant— his appearance was no chance encounter. The man hadn't ordered anything at the bar, not even a drink. Moreover, the Lake's call girl's were more than willing to play out the lonely traveler's sex-on-the-Moon fantasies. This wayfarer wanted something else.

Zara turned and headed back for HIL, deciding to cut through a hydroponics warehouse a few blocks down. Swallowing panic, Zara quickened her pace. Deliberate steps. Inside the warehouse, she passed a line of glycol pumps and air filters stacked in a honeycomb of hex crates. The place was still, the workers gone home. Zara climbed into the cab of a swing-loader and hunkered down.

Minutes passed as she staked out the storage bay. "Gate Gate, Para Gate, Para Sam Gate, Bodhi Swaha..." Repeating soothing mantra after soothing mantra felt a paltry defense against a precocious lunacy. Whispering to herself in the dark, chasing phantoms in the lunar after-hours... Christ, she felt ridiculous. "This is bullshit." She flung the loader's hatch wide.

The sound of boot scuffs reverberated through the warehouse. Zara slowly crawled back into the cab and resealed the hatch. In the dim back-light, the wayfarer's rangy physique had morphed into a wraith-like silhouette. He stood for a moment, fedora panning the cement interiors, silent. Zara waited, breath ragged, skin damp and prickly.

"I mean you no harm," he called out. "It wasn't my intention to scare you and I apologize if I upset you. It's just..." he paused, walking into the cone of an overhead halogen, the glint of his chiseled chin and nose just visible under the hat's brim. "—It's just that you've forgotten something."

She hadn't forgotten anything. It was a ploy, a way to draw her out. Zara slumped into the seat, head scrunched below the headrest.

"I'll leave you my code," he said, pulling out a data fin from his wallet. "I'm staying at the Hotel Laplace, near Le Tour de Jardin. Just flash the fin at the concierge station. It should get you up to my room. My shuttle's not leaving for another three weeks."

He sat the fin down on a hex-crate, tapping the card with his forefinger. Zara watched him through the fogging Plexiglas. Shutting her eyes, she tried to blank her mind and make the wayfarer disappear. No luck; the meditative flush failed to

atomize him. Lingered, the man finally turned and left.

"Best of luck, lieutenant," he shouted over his shoulder.

Zara remained in the stuffy cab. Finally, she opened the hatch and crawled out. She picked up the data fin, an encoded sheet of lithographed semiconductor with the splashy icon of some on-world Trade subsidiary etched into substrate. There was no name, the wayfarer's information hidden inside the fin's associative network. She bowed the flimsy card. It was real all right, not some fabrication of her deluded mind. She tucked it into her flight jumper and headed back out into the Arc.

#

"'Best of luck, lieutenant'," Zara repeated. "He knew something—that wayfarer knew something."

"About your mission?" Pierre asked, his attention focused on driving. "Unlikely. I wouldn't worry."

"It just seems goddamn suspicious. That's all."

The hum of the carryall's turbine and the strobe of tunnel lights calmed her, the paranoia abating. She had taken Pierre up on his offer. The neurologist's overly generous gesture seemed a better choice than navigating the Arc's frantic maze of stalkers—real or perceived.

"You said he gave you something?"

"His data fin." She pulled it from a leg pocket. "Typical Grade Five type, guest client pass-codes, global corp promos, contact details, complete with a personalized message from the wayfarer himself, no doubt. Boilerplate PR."

"Clandestine types usually don't advertise. And he even told you where he was staying, right?"

"That doesn't mean anything. It could be a fake address, the hotel room could be a front. Union espionage tactics, counter-intelligence rewards paranoia, which doesn't put me in the healthiest of spots," Zara quipped.

"Healthy?" Pierre shrugged. "Hard to say. Humans are in a constant battle with our vestigial minds. Animals are paranoid neurotics because they've no alternative. It's a matter of survival. Us? Not so much." Pierre pedantic tone annoyed her. "I think with a little focus, we can re-align your fear centers, hone your filters, and rehabilitate. It's a relearning process."

"I shouldn't have mentioned anything; I'm sorry."

She felt foolish, naiveté mixed with phobias – all of it over-reactive nonsense. She needed to be stronger and less fearful; the mission required it.

Passing the outer interchange, Pierre pulled into the Arc's airlock inspection station. Zara opened the door and stepped out. Puzzled, Pierre watched from the driver's seat as she wandered past a huddle of technicians towards the tessellated wall of sun-shielding.

"Please, mademoiselle, you must return to the vehicle," a gendarme called. "You're holding up the queue."

Zara gazed out at the rolling moonscape of Lacus Smniorum, The Lake of Dreams. Something was askew, rearranged. Above the Lake's light grid, Lagrange dangled next to Earth, a dapple of pinpricks, its pseudo-constellation drawing order from the celestial clutter. The sky felt too simple, too sterile. She envisioned clotted jungles threaded by an interplanetary cord, the vacuum replaced by

cyclonic winds churning water-heavy clouds for thousands of kilometers. Artificial memories like flashbacks, Zara lacked the proper mnemonics to decode the cipher. Sense distorted into a mirrored reality.

It's gotta be the 'bleed', she thought, there's no other explanation. The Pilot isn't taking; I'm rejecting the implant.

"Zara!" Pierre shouted, getting out of the carryall and jogging over. "They're about to do the seal check. We've got to go."

She didn't answer at first, hypnotized by the view beyond the gold-sputtered window. "Is double-vision a side effect? It's like I'm seeing two places at once." She closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose.

Pierre took in the view and shrugged. "Perhaps. Is it the usual *deja vu* or something else? Maybe we can get you on an anti-seizure regiment."

"No... —I don't know," she exclaimed, frustrated.

"Zara." Pierre snapped his fingers, catching her eyes. "We should be leaving."

"Right," she said, shaking off the fit. "I just lost myself for a bit."

"No bother," Pierre smiled. "Let's go."

They returned to the carryall. Pierre drove the vehicle into the inspection station as technicians tapped the hydrostatic valve with overpressure. A green flash from the sensor indicated zero atmospheres. Pierre pulled out of the airlock and into lunar vacuum.

Rumbling across the Lake's outer beltway, they headed towards the Noctarium bypass. Sunshine tipped the outer mountains. Another week or two

and it would be lunar dawn. The road was smooth and empty, the tarmac freshly ionized.

"I thought shift traffic would be worse this time of day." Pierre tried to make conversation.

"Folks at the Noctarium work odd hours, mostly legionaries synced to orbital days, like me."

Circadian experiments on orbit showed a natural tendency towards thirty-hour days, out of rhythm with the civilian's standard twenty-four. It was more efficient —so went the research— more time on station, less time suiting-up and suiting-down.

Another airlock and Pierre pulled into the Nocatarium's undercroft.

"Thanks for the lift."

Zara opened the door and stepped out. She patted down her jumper. Her cap —usually folded and tucked underneath her left epaulet— was missing. She couldn't recall wearing it. She didn't remember pinning her hair up either; it'd been a tangled mess and in her eyes all day.

"I could swear... " her voice trailed. "Wait a minute... shit! He was right."

"Right about what?"

"I did lose something, now that I think of it. My cap. He was trying to return it to me; that's got to be it." She exhaled. "I must have left it at the noodle bar."

"But I don't remember you wearing a cap. Are you sure?"

"Legion protocol, we're required to remove it indoors."

"Okay..." Pierre squinted, confused. "So, why didn't he just leave your cap? Why did he leave his data fin instead?"

Zara didn't have an answer.

[CP] CHAPTER TWO

The nurse pumped adrenal corticosteroids into her femoral catheter. Regolith coated the cockpit, the matte grey speckled by warning lights. A yank of the ejection cord did nothing, the seat's rocket a dud. She mumbled a garbled 'Mayday.' A wall of radio hiss flooded her ears in reply. Through the shattered canopy, sunlight filtered in. Zara stretched her gloved hand through a crack and touched the Moon. Inverted, she had crashed her Avenger on the lunar surface.

Grogginess faded, replaced by a dull headache. She wiggled her legs and arms. Nothing broken. Her pressure suit held air. No leaks. Through the ship's umbilical, she felt the prickle of a million phantom limbs. Massive damage. Pain indicators pointed to a severed wing-jet and bomb rack, most likely a glancing hit from ground seeker. Zara remembered nothing.

Both ion engines were gone, amputated, ejected after overheating. A shower of sparks heralded the death knell of spacecraft's plasma batteries. Zara wrenched her helmet free from the umbilical, severing her mind from the Avenger's sensorium. With a slap of the harness buckle, she fell through the canopy glass. Squirring out from under the wreckage, she crawled to a nearby boulder.

"Mayday, Mayday, this is Minerva, does anybody read? Over."

Radio interference, more static, the electrical fire swamped all channels including encrypted longwave. She pulled the survival pack from the Avenger's belly hatch and took inventory. Neatly

packaged inside was a rebreather filter, coolant, electrolytes, and a small oxygen tank. Not much, but it would have to do.

Tied to her leg was the nurse. Its sensors transmitted vitals back to the Lake for review by Legion's flight surgeons, assuming the device could broadcast. Another torrent of sparks filled the airwaves.

"How in the hell...?" Zara looked around, trying to remember.

She'd wrecked on the Far Side, the sun washing the craters in bath of silver-white. A ridgeline rose to the north. A microwave relay tower sat perched atop its gray bulge. To the south the lunar plain stretched towards the Moon's foreshortened horizon. Gauging the sun, she guessed she was in the lower latitudes, the austral crater region or Poincare; but all Moonscapes looked the same.

Zara plotted her crash trajectory. A kilometer long furrow trailed off to the east, debris scattered along the glide path. Shrapnel peppered the empty motor housing, its gimbals frayed to the stump. The culprit was a projectile weapon, the ordnance most likely hand-held and shoulder fired.

Union saboteurs and guerillas ran amok on the Far Side, the hemisphere vast and impossible to patrol. To fly the region solo was risky. Why was she here? Either a concussion or amnesia, she couldn't remember the mission, taking off, the flight or the crash.

The nurse, acting on feedback, augmented her vitals to alleviate shock, but the triage was unnecessary. Nothing hurt, not even strap welts. She felt well rested, limber, and free of pain. Lunar crash landings were the stuff of legend;

legionaries rarely walked away from them. To come through unscathed was a million to one.

"Mayday. This is Minerva," she hailed again.

Through the static, the sidebands cleared.

"Minerva. This is Mothership. Do you read? Over."

"I read you loud and clear. Over."

"Hostiles moving into your vicinity. You will to need to evacuate and evade. Over."

"What happened? Over"

"Small weapons fire. Saboteurs. They brought you down. There are union guerillas moving towards the relay tower. We're sending an evacuation team. ETA, forty-five minutes. Over."

"Understood, Mothership. Over and out."

Zara pulled the sidearm from her thigh holster and unlocked it. Ten energy rounds left. Someone must have issued her a half-clip by mistake. She would have to fire sparingly. Getting her bearings, Zara noted a utility trench snaking up the hill towards the relay tower and an adjoining receiver shack. Sanctuary and safety.

The cement conduit gave little cover—less than a meter deep— but it would have to do. Belly crawling, she struggled not to stir up dust. Lunar prowling was an art, keeping a low profile, tedious. Zara checked her oxygen. Thirty minutes left, no time for rescue, she would have to reach the shack before the unionists or risk hypoxia. Careful to conserve air, she slithered out.

"Shit!"

The guerillas spotted her from up the hill. Launch flash. The shock wave rippled through the dust. The missile struck a few meters ahead of her, missing but sending ejecta spiraling into the black. With oxygen wasting, she sprung into the

air and fired a precious round, the recoil propelling her skyward. Another missile whizzed underneath, its electrical hum distorting the radio sideband. Aloft, she fired a second round to shift trajectory.

With a thud and a bounce, she toppled into the conduit. Another volley. Meteoric fragments rained down. The guerillas were using a rail-gun. Zara crawled along the trench and up the hill, stopping just short of the tower. Like a gopher, she popped up for a peak. Three unionists tumbled and skipped towards the shack. Zara unloaded her weapon. The rounds disintegrated on impact, waxy duds with no stopping power. Worthless.

"What the fuck?"

At the airlock, the saboteurs fiddled with the lock. Zara tossed the pistol and rushed in. They were going to seal themselves inside then let the lunar vacuum finish her. Covering his comrades, the rail-gunner dropped to one knee and aimed point-blank. The bazooka-like weapon misfired, its capacitors depleted.

Zara grabbed the graphite barrel, ripped it free, and cracked the unionist in the gut. The guerrilla cart-wheeled in the weak gravity. Deserting their comrade, the others clambered into the shack and sealed the airlock. Zara tossed the rail-gun into the breach but the hydraulics were too strong. The barrel's toroid snapped, its coils crushed into splinters.

Zara pounded on the pressure door. "Open it!"

"Minerva, stop!" a voice pleaded. It was the rail-gunner, crawling back up the hill behind her. "It's over. Cease hostilities."

"How do you know my call sign?" Zara faced the prostrate unionist. "Who the hell are you?"

"A friendly."

"—Bullshit—"

"Join us, Minerva. Join the cause."

Zara scoffed.

"We need your talents. CGT needs your talents. Join the fight."

"What?"

The man muttered inaudibly. His nervous tremolo mixed with static.

"That's it. You're done."

Blabbering pleads.

Zara picked up a rock and crushed his helmet. Screams faded to gurgles. His face distended with bruised contusion, eyes bursting from hemorrhage. Zara popped the quick-connect on his oxygen tank then coupled it to her regulator. Tying the spare to her harness, she now had enough air to last hours.

Heading back to the hut, a coldness bled along her inner thigh. Cotton mouthed and numb, she reeled from the Etorphine drip. The nurse was malfunctioning. Without ripping through her flight suit, there was no way to disengage the tranquilizer. She fell to her knees.

The airlock reopened. The two unionists stepped out and bounded towards her. Groggily, she reached up to ward them off.

"Stop the exercise! Legionnaire down. Repeat. Legionnaire down!"

"Christ! She killed him!"

"This is Mothership, Minerva subdued. Evacuation inbound. Drift-dive aborted."

#

She woke to the beat of her heart, its metronome amplified into soothing feedback through a pair of audio-jacks. A tangerine radiance filled her

goggles as she eased into another pseudo day. Out of the ether, a mnemonic appeared. The white flowerpot hung in space and drifted towards her. A whisper of the word 'Pompidou' and the fugue ended.

Like all drift-dives, rest was minimal. Her mind cleared but the body remained exhausted. Similar to insomnia, the fatigue was torturous but day-in/day-out maintainable. She stretched and wrung out the stiffness, her joints stiff with swelling.

Voices broke the quiet.

Someone removed the sunrise goggles. Zara blinked. Two legionaries leered at her broodingly. Confused, Zara shrugged as she removed the headgear and placed it on a nearby instrument rack. She asked for coffee. One of the men, a Sergeant Bardu, handed her a bulb without speaking.

"Do you think she knows?" Bardu whispered. "Do you think she remembers?"

"—About Caporal Renard?"

"Yeah."

"—What about Caporal Renard? —Hey, Bardu" Zara chaffed. "If you have something to ask me, ask me."

Bardu paused, his dark eyes accusatory. "How does it feel, Zara? Tell us."

"Drift-diving? I don't know... weird, like a dream."

He smirked. "That's not what I'm talking about."

"Then what are you talking about?"

"You'll find out," Bardu said, crossing his arms contemptuously.

"—How is Mademoiselle Zara?" Malik asked, stepping through the bulkhead door with a forced smile. "Awake, I see."

"Barely."

"—You two," he said, addressing the legionnaires. "You can leave."

"What about Renard?" Bardu asked.

"It's being dealt with. Now leave," Malik ordered, his voice firm.

Both the men filed out.

"What was that about?"

Malik was chief engineer for the Titan program, a tall broad-shouldered Senegalese with a deep but soft voice. Unlike most Moon rats, his uniform was always pressed and starched. Days spent in the wastes of the outer seas, he somehow avoided the ubiquitous dust. Not a fleck. Zara suspected multiple Maliks, hatched from cocoons monthly, each pristine as a newborn.

"There was an incident..." Malik's eyes dimmed.

"An incident?" Zara paused to gather her thoughts. "Where am I?"

"Ocean of Storms. On the Far Side frontier."

"I don't recognize this place."

"It's an outer operating center —a remote base— used as a listening post." Malik poured himself a bulb of coffee from the beverage dispenser. He took a long sip punctuated by a satisfied smack. "This is where we were staging your drift-dive exercise. —You remember nothing?"

"No... maybe," Zara paused, eyes narrowed. "I was floating —or flying— or something... right?"

"Something like that."

"I thought these were simulations, umbilical training for the Victoria." Zara stood up but fell back into her chair, her thigh seized with cramp.

"—Jesus, my leg."

"Yes, that..." Malik set his coffee down and helped her to a nearby sofa. The room wasn't a

typical surgical bay, more like a cramped officer billet. Micronized amenities crowded the living space. "A contusion due to a misfired morphine needle from your on-board nurse, I apologize."

"So I was flying."

"Not exactly." Malik's face contorted as he searched for the right words. "We wanted to see how well you executed a survival, evasion, and escape exercise. Prior to the drift-dive's mnemonic cue, we strapped you into a mock-up of a crashed Avenger. We sent in a squad of special operatives disguised as guerillas. No live rounds, just Teflon composites. Unfortunately, things went too far and there was an incident."

"And how is all this relevant to my mission, if I can ask?"

"Indirectly. It's important for the program to stress-test the Pilot implant to insure the mission's success."

His explanation didn't make sense, but she let it go. "You mentioned an incident."

"Yes," he paused. "Someone died."

"And I killed him?" Zara exclaimed, eyes wide in horror. "—Colonel Malik, this is not what I signed up for."

"Titan, in cooperation with Legion's gendarmerie, have launched an inquiry, a report's been filed. It was our fault, not yours." Malik nodded, eyes closed in capitulation.

"How did it happen?"

"You cracked an operative's air manifold... intentionally. Rapid depressurization, he died instantly."

Zara was silent. For a Legion pilot, killing was abstract. Dropping re-entry bombs from orbit — watching death from a distance— lacked visceral

exigency. Notions of hand-to-hand 'blood and guts' combat was just so much phantasmagoria.

"No one briefed me prior to the drift-dive. I thought this was another flight simulation. Instead, you've flown me half-way around the planet just to frag one of my own? I'm sure you can see why I'm a little confused."

"—Listen, Zara..." Malik sensed her anger and crouched down to look her in the eyes. "You are the Pilot implant's inaugural candidate. This is not just about Titan and the mission. We have to explore the implant's potential. This is a rare moment of study. If we had briefed you prior to the exercise, it would have corrupted your instinct."

"Who was it? Who did I kill?"

"Caporal Renard. Did you know him?"

Zara shook her head. "Not well, no."

Like a surgeon's scalpel, guilt cut clean required few sutures. Zara was quick to heal. The Pilot made things simpler, inquietude buried behind walls of synthetic proteins. It was a talent to detach, to force triviality on the traumatic. What she had done for years —burying everything— the implant did automatically.

"I suppose we could engineer your drift-dives to be less rigorous..."

"Are they mission critical?"

"No, but to circumvent the schedule, we'd have to petition contracts and notify Trade. But in light of this recent casualty, we may not have a choice."

"—You know what?" Zara stood up and straightened her flight suit, patting out the wrinkles. "Forget it. Don't change a thing. I can handle whatever scenario you think is appropriate."

Malik's eyes widened with surprise. "Okay..."

Zara nodded. "But I would like to read the incident report when it's available."

Malik shook his head. "I'm afraid that will be held at a different classification level."

"I'm not briefed to my own activities? What if I remember details?"

"You won't" Malik replied, adamant.

"But I could"

"-Zara..." Malik went to the beverage dispenser for another coffee. "Do you remember your dreams the next day?"

Zara thought for a moment then spoke. "Occasionally."

"But do you really remember? Or are they like drops down the drain, fleeting images, small snippets oddly misplaced, déjà vu..."

"I don't think much about my dreams. I have them, but..."

Malik nodded. "The machinery of thought runs at a premium, dreams have little room in the brain's day-to-day function. Without the anchor of our conscious mind, unlearned fragments evaporate."

"But what about hypnosis?"

"No comment."

#

Le Boudin was empty when Zara arrived. An officer's bar, it catered to the thirty-hour cycle of orbital days. Most patrons were put off by the seemingly random schedule, out of synch with The Arc's civilian bustle. Zara took a seat near the pressure glass. Perched atop the Arc's central tower and marquee, the lounge overlooked the arcology's geodesic glow and the lunar nightscape beyond.

Zara scanned the league boards near the battle lounge. Cote d'Vore —her old clan— was ahead in the standings against Guyana and Corsica, their intra-Legion rivals. On large screens ran looped highlights of the previous week. She watched as two Cote d'Vore Va-gas tore apart a swarm of spider-bots in a fury of flame and hydraulic pincers. In triumph, the Va-gas mecha exploded in a tree of Tesla arc. The camera panned the aftermath of warped metal and composite, the underground cistern blackened with the belch of mechanized combat.

"You miss it?" Julian said, sliding into the booth across from her.

"The league? No, not really." Zara looked over at the lounge's empty umbilical pods. "Gear heads and jocks endlessly welding hangar queens into gladiators, I got bored with it."

"You used to obsess over the Va-gas, camped out on the umbilical like a fetus. You loved it."

She shrugged. "Things change."

Zara ordered a Manhattan, Julian a Vodka tonic. The bartender brought the tumblers over and they exchanged brief pleasantries. Julian sat silently, pensive and agitated. Zara lit a cigarette. Separate from The Arc's HVAC, Le Boudin offered an oasis for the nicotine addicted.

"Your eyes..." Julian said. "You look like your recruit photo."

Runny eyeliner, dyed hair, sunken cheeks, Zara remembered the winter morning like yesterday. She'd woken up on a filthy futon in Latin Quarter, her boyfriend's dealer pounding on the door. She'd taken the empty Metro then walked through the rain to the portcullis of Fort de Nogent. A soft knock

on the guardhouse door and within hours they had processed her, laminated dossier photo in hand.

"I won't take that as a compliment."

"Are you getting much sleep?"

"More or less... chemical sleep: a handful of gel caps, a half-liter of cold medicine," Zara smirked.

"Funny," Julian said, sullen, "and what about the sleepwalking?"

"—We've had this conversation, Julian," Zara snapped, taking a drag from her Export A. "It's not sleepwalking, it's 'drift-diving' —hypnosis —mnemonic cueing —all very controlled. I don't sleepwalk. I've never sleepwalked." Zara grew annoyed. She took a sip of her Bourbon and sweet vermouth then gazed idly into the lunar night.

Julian changed the subject. "I still get messages from your mother. I received one the other day. Duplicitous, of course, just friendly enough, she's always fishing."

"And what do you tell her?"

"Not much." Julian gestured with his empty tumbler at the bartender for another round. "You don't give me much to gossip about these days."

"What was my mother carrying on about?"

"Do you care?"

Zara scowled.

"The same... problems with your sister, complaints about how you never visit, the miserable state of the world —Are you going to call her before the launch?"

Zara shifted uncomfortably. She remembered her one and only trip down the Well after deployment. Julian had tagged along, making the family visit all the more awkward. A stifling summer in Lausanne: the horrid smell off the lake,

claustrophobic gravity –almost as bad as weight of her mother's guilt. The month lasted an eternity. Back safely in zero gravity, she swore to never return.

"I'll call her soon," Zara lied. "Did she mention Margot?"

"She's not talking again, goes missing for days –Why do I have to relay the details?" Julian argued. "It's not my dysfunctional family."

Zara stubbed lit another cigarette from the stub of her first one. "I don't want to do this, Julian?"

"Dredge up the past?"

"If that's what you call it."

The bartender set down a napkin and another Vodka tonic, replacing Julian's empty. "Me neither, Zara." He dry swallowed then took a sip. "That's why I'm going to make this easy for you."

Zara raised an eyebrow, hands fisted around her glass. Julian reached into his breast pocket, pulled out the palladium pin, and set it on the table. Her first sortie medal, a rite of passage among pilots. She'd given it to him after they'd first made love. Juvenile and silly, the gesture seemed more important at the time. She picked it up. A small sapphire, diamond, and ruby –the colors of the Legion– spread across raptor wings, 'Esprit de Corp' embossed on the cordon beneath.

"I'm sorry, Julian." She blinked and looked away.

He shook his head and forced a tight smile. "It's overdue."

She nodded.

"And you know what's funny?"

Zara shook her head.

"It's funny that Zara —queen of the bohemian vagabonds— warrior gypsy— will be frozen in time, for... how long?"

"—Ten years round trip," Zara added. "Give or take."

"A decade, while the rest of the world changes. It's ironic, don't you think?" Julian gulped his tonic. "Or is it that the world doesn't change fast enough for Zara?" he said, slamming the glass down.

Zara didn't answer.

"I'm leaving in a few weeks —down to low orbit for a three-month stint on a surveillance gantry—and I'm not big on loose ends."

Zara nodded.

"Our relationship was over when you signed with Titan. I knew that; I'm not a fool. A small part of me still hoped, but..." Julian took another sip of tonic. "This estrangement you feel for me —for everything— implant induced or not— it doesn't matter does it? It's just a convenient segue."

"—I never thought you were a fool."

"I'd convinced myself that Lagrange were brain butchers," Julian continued, "that they'd pithed you, scrambled your mind, but now..." Julian took a last sip. "I think whatever they did, they've unearthed the true Zara."

"That's not fair or true."

"I'm not convinced otherwise."

Zara said nothing.

"Anyway, best of luck, lieutenant." Julian stood up, hit the table's pay sensor, and left.

"Julian..."

Minutes passed. She ran her finger around the rim of her empty glass. He'd made it too easy. For Zara, breaking up was a matter of atrophy hurried

by neglect. Sometimes problems when ignored did go away. She gave him credit for doing what she could not.

"Another?"

"No," she replied

The bartender took away the empties. More of a crowd now, Le Boudin was filling up. Across the central bar through the haze, she noticed the wayfarer visible in the bar's counter-glow. Fear prickled her neck, her episode with Julian quickly forgotten. She lit another cigarette. It trembled in her fingers. Closing her eyes she quieted her mind then stood to confront the stranger.

"You never did drop by," the wayfarer said, a wry smile creasing his thin lips. "I was expecting to hear from you."

"Listen." Zara pulled up a stool. "I don't do stalkers, so..."

"—Awfully presumptuous," the wayfarer interrupted. "The Arc's a small place and I like my Cubans." He picked up a freshly lit cigar from the ash vent and took a puff. "Would you like to share a drink with me?" He gestured to his tumbler of Scotch.

"Do you have it with you?"

He sipped his whisky then spoke. "And what would I have with me?"

"My cap, the one I left at the noodle bar. You chased me down the other night trying to return it, or don't you remember?"

"I don't remember anything about a lost cap," the wayfarer said smugly, his blue eyes wandering to one of the LCD screens dangling above their heads.

"So what did I forget?" Zara's voice wavered. "Out with it. Come on. I don't do games."

The wayfarer grinned. It was some elaborate come on, a byzantine pick-up scheme. More stupefied than offended, Zara failed to appreciate his cryptic game.

"Can I give you some advice?"

"If you think I need it," the wayfarer replied.

"The mysterious stranger thing... drop it; it's creepy. I recommend a bottle of ether and zip ties... quicker. Cut to the chase. Do a girl a favor," Zara said, swiping the wayfarer's pay sensor. "Drink up, fuck off, and leave me alone."

"You really can't recall what it is you've forgotten?" the wayfarer raised his voice over the noise.

Zara hit the elevator button and didn't look back.

"Your loss, sleepwalker. If you change your mind, you know where to find me," he shouted.

'Best of luck, lieutenant', she replayed his parting quip in her mind. This man —this wayfarer— knew something. Panic welled. Anger gave way to fear. Spinning around, Zara wove her way back to the bar.

"What did you just call me?" Zara elbowed in next to him.

"Have I piqued your interest?"

"—You called me a 'sleepwalker.'"

"Do you remember anything —anything at all?" the wayfarer repeated, pale eyes searing.

"Right now, I'm asking you the questions."

"I know about your mission. I know about the Pilot implant and Titan. I know about Victoria and Alpha Proxima."

"Bullshit. Listen, you'd better tell me who you are —and quick— before I report you to the

gendarmes. You're at the Lake now. We're under marshal law. Up here, Legion doesn't fuck around."

The wayfarer was employing classic –if not a clumsy– espionage tactics. It could be a test; he could be some Legion agent masquerading as a spy, using his forged data fin as simple cover. The Lake –a remote military installation and capital of Legion's global strike force– was prime for cloak and dagger skullduggery. If it was a test, they were fools to think they could pass this wayfarer off as authentic.

"No need to bring in the authorities," the wayfarer lowered his voice, drawing in close. "My name is Bernard, and the party I represent believes Legion has ulterior motives with regard to Pilot research. We also suspect that they've lied to you about the implant."

"Oh?" Zara cracked a smile, mocking him. "And how did you come by that information?"

"We have our sources."

"Right," Zara sneered. "So what is it, what do you want from me?"

"Anything you can remember from your recovery, from the drift-dives... anything. We're very interested."

"The drift-dives, so you're familiar?"

He nodded.

"Unfortunately for you, I don't remember shit." A hack spy at best, the wayfarer's ineptitude nearly made him harmless. "I'm sorry that I'm unable to oblige you –and for the record, I'm not buying your act. I think you're a phony, a plant, sent to test me."

"Believe what you will. You're a smart girl, Zara. I won't insult your intelligence."

"How do you know my name?"

He smiled with a furtive wink. "I know quite a bit about you. Do you still have my fin?"

Zara nodded, not wanting to admit it was still tucked away in her front pocket.

"Come find me. CGT will make it worth your while."

"I should report you to LISP."

"—You won't."

"And why not?"

"Because we have information you might find of interest. An equitable trade perhaps? We could strike a bargain."

Zara shook her head. "What information could you possibly have that would cause me to commit treason?"

"Information about your father."

Zara paused. Eyes wide, her throat seized.

"I thank you for the drink." He put on his fedora and got up from the bar. "We'll talk soon."

[CP] CHAPTER THREE

The eclipse. Xanduvian 'night'.

Through the miasma, beyond the vines, fluttering wings swirled in the updrafts. Nocturnal chirps swelled and mingled with the ship's internal hum. Ephemeral creatures, they had yet to greet her; the aliens were in no hurry to make formal introductions.

"Lost."

Zara forced the sky to conform, fiddling in frustration as the error bars stretched to fit the star field. The navigator failed to merge the charts —nebulae, galaxies, pulsars, all askew. According to recent estimates, the Victoria's destination was Alpha Proxima, plus or minus eight light years. But Earth was only four light years distance. She could be anywhere. Haze encroached. Dust and water vapor clouded the guidance optics and distorted the spectrometer. She would have to wait.

Days ago, Zara had piloted the unwieldy spacecraft through the clouds to Xanadu's Lagrange point, a weightless oasis equidistant from its twin conjoined worlds. Moored to the Victoria's outriggers, quick-growing vines anchored the ship to the planet-system's massive accretion column. A peculiar in-between place, the rocky axle —which Zara dubbed the 'Beanstalk'— supported a unique ecosystem despite its lack of gravity.

Zara yawned, eyes watering. Tweaking and extrapolating star charts for hours, her temples now throbbed. Exhausted, she crawled into her sleeping berth. After months spent at Victoria's

helm, the fidgety mania of endless drift-dives had sapped her. She craved sleep, natural restful sleep.

Removing the umbilical from her spinal jack, she embraced the quiet. She idly stirred a pack of reconstituted yogurt. Intended as a quick meal before bed, Zara found herself too tired to eat it. Barely awake, she cinched herself into the berth's cocoon and quickly fell asleep.

She did not dream.

#

The sound of raspy clicks on the Victoria's outer hull woke her. Fumbling with the jack, she clipped in the umbilical and felt the tingle of electrical shorts. The cabin lights flickered. More tingles, then the sharp sting of a severed power cable. Damage reports flooded into her sensorium. She unzipped from the berth and climbed into her gear.

Back on the flight deck, Zara toggled through the exterior cameras. A thick fog had moved in. Through the blur, dappled shadows scurried over the ship's graphite skin. An aft camera zoomed in to the engine cowling. Bugs the size of a house cats gnawed at the coil shielding, prying open access panels. They fluttered about with rainbow wings, their shiny carapaces cocked sideways like a beetle.

"What the hell...?"

Zara removed a survival kit from a stowage locker. Pulling out the sidearm, she popped in a brightly colored clip. Rough count put the beetle swarm at one hundred, maybe two, far more rounds than the pistol held. Scaring them seemed the only tactic.

Cracking the airlock, water poured over the pressure seal. Bulging with surface tension, condensation had collected in pools along the hull. Zara buckled into the tether harness, strapped on her breathing mask, and slipped the sidearm into her thigh holster.

A bug buzzed its way inside the airlock vestibule. With a kick, she sent the biomass tumbling back out into space. Unfettered, the creature righted itself and hovered. Black menacing eyes gazed at her. Zara drew the pistol, cocked, and fired. The needle blast dismembered the beast, fragments of exoskeleton balling into greasy lumps.

A roar of insect wings filled the air. The swarm dove for the carcass, tearing it apart with abandon. Frenzied, the beetle-things stripped limbs from their still-living kindred. Zara sealed the airlock. Through the porthole, she watched the devouring. Seconds later only shreds remained.

Still berserk, the multitudes plowed into the Victoria with wet thumps. Unable to pry their claws into the door seal, they massed together and coalesced into a meaty battering ram. Wave after wave, the beetles careened into the door, its porthole encrusted with a dripping green mucous.

Minutes later, the beetles abandoned their siege and returned to vandalizing the ship. Zara watched from the relative safety of the flight deck. Another cable exploded. Arcs of high-voltage saturated the camera's pixels. Beetle parts floated up and dispersed in the wind. Another wedged itself into the sub-hull, its head buried like a tick.

The umbilical delivered another jolt. More damage. Zara winced and reached for her spinal

jack. Its pain threshold was dialed too high. She isolated the source: they had gnawed into a power converter and shorted the hull's deionizer circuit. More sparks. One of the burrowing creatures breached a bulkhead, its body aglow from discharge. Dead, the electrocuted thing drifted away. More flotsam. The others took advantage, consuming what remained.

"The dionizers... that's it."

Used to disperse static build-up, the ship's dionizing system rinsed the outer hull with electric current. Designed to insulate the Victoria from corona while in relativistic flight, it was of little use while at dock, until now. Zara toggled the back-up fuel cells then let loose. Plasma washed over the water-beaded hull. Droplets exploded into steam. The beetles twitched as their roasted bodies stiffened.

"Take that, fuckers."

Zara checked the fuel cells. Only a few more blasts remained. The back-ups recharged using Titan's reactors. Intended to run life-support while at dock, the auxiliary's capacity was limited. Too many bursts would sap the spacecraft's reserves. With the Titan reactor's dormant, recharging the system was a tedious and painful process.

The hours wore on. Zara maintained an anxious vigil, alert for signs of the beetles' return.

Through the fog emerged a stormy cloudscape. Like paintings of divine wrath, reds and oranges splashed over broiling nimbus. She squinted through the cockpit glass at the Beanstalk's spiral column. The sun peaked out. Leaves kissed spheres of free-floating rain. Globular rainbows refracted through mammoth droplets. Clinging

aphid-like, the beetles infested the floating jungle. A clutch of writhing larva dangled from a spur of nickel-iron while the adults fed the young regurgitant.

Much to Zara's despair, the multitudes had trickled back within the hour. The hull reverberated with clicks and chortles mixed with the tearing of graphite. She flipped the switch again. Another crackle of electricity rippled over the carbon hull. The airborne flotsam of burnt beetles drifted up from the ship like dander.

The back-ups only had enough power for two more blasts. Time was running out.

Curled up in the cockpit's gravity chair, tears stung as her lips quivered. Her chest heaved in swallowed sobs. The endless drift-dives, the hypnosis of flight, the Victoria's constant acceleration —all of it— just to end up here... She fought back homesickness.

"Stop it, Zara" she whispered, "stop..."

She closed her eyes and remembered The Tuamotus and the Akamaru beach. Another dropped term at Sorbonne, university life replaced by tropical nights filled with druggy hedonism. The expat party was endless.

She had woken early that day, the cotton clouds drifting over azure seas. Wading into the surf, she felt the Pacific's warmth, its foamy flow like a cleanse. A rare moment of quiet. For such a beautiful place, she rarely saw its sun soaked beaches. Island life was a nocturnal jumble of carnal gratification, a manic dance of electronic beats and inebriation. 'Days' began at sunset.

Zara remembered the pull of the aquamarine horizon and Paris beyond; an espresso at Le Chat Noir, the mustiness of the math library, a quick

smoke on the Rue de Four. She craved a routine. The longing had reduced her to a heartsick child, weak and pathetic. Alone on the beach, the carefree excess was no witness to her sentimental trespass.

Zara pushed up her sleeve. The black patterns of the Marikoriko –the Polynesian Eve– ringed her wrist. Surrounded by the harlequin faces of her cheering party-friends, she let the Marquesan tattoo her. It was supposed to be a cheerful a souvenir, instead it reminded her of that most lonely of mornings.

“Come on. Snap out of it. Get it together.”

Zara rubbed her chest. A sob escaped. No regrets, don't look back. Time moved forward –always forward– and like the Chronophage, the past lacked form; it lacked nutrients, its energy already consumed. Her universe was the cramped cabin of the Victoria and the menace of Xanadu outside. This was her world now. Nothing else mattered.

The beetles returned. Another blast. The main cell neared empty. She would have to fire up the reactors. She had no choice. Buried deep in the Victoria's twin Titan drives, deuterium and anti-deuterium swirled inside containment coils. A complicated spaghetti of interwoven fields acted as a porous membrane. Configured properly, their complexity could be manipulated. Dribbling anti-matter into the reactor to annihilate, the controlled burst would create pure energy.

The relativistic Titans –a turbo-charged variant of the Bussard drive– were the most intricate engines ever designed. And with such an elaborate chunk of hardware, came an equally complicated

user's manual. Re-ignition would steal precious time.

Zara hastily set to work on the power-up sequence. More beetles collected on the hull. She dialed down the umbilical's pain threshold to small tingles and ignored the damage. Hours wore on as she sweated through the procedural start-up as the hull began to perforate from the unrelenting assault.

Like a symphony, the Titans came online, the whirring cacophony morphing into harmony. After days of power down, Victoria's heart pulsed with life.

Zara cracked a smile. Particle flux streamed into the charging coils. The cell indicator glowed from red to orange, then finally green to blue. A deep bass filled the ship as the Gaussian fields swelled. Vortexes swirled outside the ship, the electro-magnets drawing dust, vapor, and beetle detritus into the reactor's primary condenser.

"Shit."

Zara felt the intakes choke with matter. She quickly sealed the manifold and purged the coils. The drowning sensation ebbed. Relief. Too much gunk in the chamber and the deuterium would annihilate all at once, destroying the Victoria.

"That was close."

With a fully charged cell, she zapped the bugs again. Deterred, the swarm pulled back and dispersed.

Zara slumped in the gravity chair and cued the briefing console. Used for watch change, the recordings were for her fugue-self, a verbal summary of daily detail intended for continuity while in drift-dive. The Pilot implant —while maintaining muscle memory— failed to weave a

cohesive thread through her dive cycles. Like a notepad on a nightstand, she documented her waking life.

Summarizing the damage, she detailed the beetle attack and the reactor restart. After hundreds of similar messages, she knew what she needed to hear. Grabbing the sunrise goggles, Zara linked them to her umbilical and started the Pilot's mnemonics sequence.

#

"Atmospheric turbulence."

She never got used to seeing herself in drift-dive. Bleary eyed and empty, she stared into the camera half-confused, an amnesiac reacting only to stimulus. Each word was deja vu, half-memories leeches into Zara's 'awake' mind in distorted replay. More a cueing than an actual briefing, most of it was brief reminders; the bugs had returned but were quickly subdued, no other attacks, all systems stable. "Atmospheric turbulence," drift-diving Zara repeated. "Distorting the sky, shifting spectrum. The 'seeing' is bad again. There is no 'seeing.' The telescope must 'adapt.'"

Adapt?

Zara replayed the segment. During the ten-hour drift-dive, she diagnosed her current navigational error in a spooky moment of clarity. Imaging the sky in outer space was simpler, less distortion. Inside Xanadu's thick atmosphere, tracking wavering starlight proved to be a greater challenge. Too much twinkle; the 'seeing' was simply no good, the spectrum shifted.

Adapt... adaptive optics? Of course! Like eyeglasses, the system needed its corrective laser. By sampling turbulence, the system could

adjust the telescope's wavefront real-time. Designed to work in the gaseous heliopause, there was no reason why it shouldn't work in air.

Zara readied herself to exit Victoria. The air was breathable with the aid of an oxygen booster and an ozone filter. No space suit would be necessary. Equipped with the guts a high-powered laser, Zara grabbed her pistol and tool satchel, then headed outside.

A humid gust greeted her. Hidden by leafy shadows, she saw no sign of the beetles. Clipping her harness to the docking halyards, she repelled along the fuselage towards the telescope dome. Torn limbs and mandibles sprouted up from access panels. Entrails littered the graphite skin creating a slimy sheen like the floor of a slaughterhouse.

Zara took in Xanadu's weirdness. Like nothing she could imagine, the vertical forests and exploded caverns of nickel-iron rose into the limitless skies. Xanadu was a planet's abortive attempt to give birth, celestial cells frozen in anaphase. Like Jack's beanstalk, the isthmus fed Xanadu's shared ecology. Its creatures—from what Zara could gather—communed between both worlds.

Arriving at the telescope, Zara opened the lens blister and went to work. The adaptive system—typically an airborne kit—required a not-so-trivial retrofit. After a quick solder-weld and a rewire, power flowed to the laser. She tapped into the Victoria's sensorium through her umbilical and felt the pump-lamp brighten.

The clouds parted. High above, the sun faded to a blood red then slipped behind one of Xanadu's nodal planetoids. Nightfall loomed.

Back inside Victoria, Zara removed her mask and climbed into the navigator chair. Canting the telescope, the survey algorithm scanned the twilight. Data poured in as the pattern recognition software went to work. Like bifocals, the skewed images refocused, stellar coordinates shifting in parallax. Xanadu's churning sky taxed the adaptive lensing. Agonizingly slow, Zara impatiently watched the reprocessed charts trickle out.

She sipped a coffee bulb and waited. Hours later, glints of crimson washed over the flight deck. Morning again. The sun gave the beetles renewed energy. Quiet all night, they were back at it. Dust and leaves swirled outside as Zara fired up the deuterium reactor. With the dionizers recharged, she zapped the beetles, the process now routine.

Head buried in digital images, Zara didn't notice the spectacle at first. Through the flight deck window, a fluid movement caught her eye. A pixilated brume consumed the sky's cloudy pink. Kilometers off, she zoomed in with an external camera. By the tens and hundreds, sleek creatures with dragonfly wings meandered aimless and confused. They swirled in swarms, in and through themselves like minnows chased by sailfish. Wings tattered, they looked near death.

"What are they doing?"

A few ceased to move, twirling in spirals blown by the wind. The beetles —not satisfied with the Victoria's epoxy and graphite— fluttered away. Elegant and bizarre, the creatures surrendered their bodies to the scavengers. A sky burial. In a macabre procession, the beetles floated back with

the broken bodies of the dying. Zara crept to a window for a closer look.

Despite their alien features —moth-eyes, tiny articulated mouth, and mane of curling antennae—the dying beings evinced an anthropomorphic intelligence. They possessed an airborne elegance, their exoskeletons streamlined and flared, nimble yet strong. Anguished, Zara could do nothing but watch.

“So beautiful.”

An updraft caught the listless aliens and blew them away from the Beanstalk. Wind then gravity would eventually catch them, and like ash their ephemeral bodies would fall to one of Xanadu's twin worlds. Rage welled. She wanted to annihilate the beetle vultures, destroy their larva. A few shots from a flare gun —maybe a little jet fuel—and the hive would burn.

No. She thought the better of it. This wasn't her world; she had no authority. Best to allow Xanduvian nature to take its course. Zara lingered as the last of dragonfly creatures disappeared.

Back to the star charts. More data. Accuracy had started to improve. She correlated the spectrum catalog. The algorithm had already eliminated Tau Ceti, Epsilon Indi, Ross, Luyten, and Sirius. Only a handful of stars remained. One more clear night would undoubtedly confirm her position.

Xanadu was a hot place, the inside of Victoria stuffy as a result. The heat exchangers were having a go of it. Sweaty and sticky, Zara took a shower and changed. Deciding on a catnap, she idled her umbilical and climbed into the webbing of her weightless berth. Just an hour or two. No drift diving.

#

Startled awake, Zara scrambled to the flight deck. She'd slept too long. Eclipsed by one of Xanadu's mini-planets, the setting sun glowed amber. Almost time. Much to her relief, only one beetle loitered about outside. Dazed or injured, it fluttered in circles like a fly stuck in water. The Victoria's bug zapper was having an effect.

After a reconstituted meal of lentils and bread pudding, Zara readied the telescope. She checked the algorithm's progress. The star charts were slowly stitching themselves together. Her location error crept down by the minute. Spectrum anomalies were still high, adding ambiguity, but with a few fuzzy logic tricks, identifying the star system would be achievable.

She activated her umbilical and retracted the telescope cover. The focus was off. Blackness blurred the star field's periphery. She checked the adaptive plungers on the mirror but nothing registered a malfunction. Something was blocking the aperture. Perched on the Victoria's dorsal hump, the external cameras were unable to image the obstruction. She would have to go outside to investigate.

Zara suited up and exited the airlock. Cooler and almost refreshing, the humidity had subsided. In the growing darkness, shadow clung to the Beanstalk jungle. A lone screech pierced the quiet. Zara tried to ignore it.

Nearing the topside, she saw it. Quickly inching back along the hull, she hunkered behind a faring. Taller and broader than the rest, one of the dying creatures perched atop the telescope cover. But this one wasn't dying. Its wings were vibrant and un-tattered, the creature's mantis-like body turgid and full. Unlike its brethren, it had

escaped the plague. Minutes passed as Zara looked on.

"What are you?"

Its jeweled moth-eyes scanned the ship's outer mold line. Head twitching, it focused its attention and gazed into the open maw of the Gaussian intakes. Its antennae chine rose from the back of its spindly neck. Sensing organs wiggled as if stirred by some electromagnetic breeze.

The alien snapped back and flexed its wings. With a hum, its four ailerons disappeared into a blur. Suddenly, it was gone, circling the Victoria before slipping into the broad leaves of the Beanstalk's curly vines.

"Come back..."

Zara retreated into the Victoria. Unobstructed, the telescope continued its survey. Huddled around the glow of flight deck's electronic hearth, she watched the automated ebb and flow of real-time data. With a flashing prompt, the algorithm was nearly done.

Accuracy steadily improved. The stellar spectrum correlated but the result was absurd — astronomically so. Zara's heart fluttered. Her armpits itched with perspiration. She squinted.

"What's going on here?"

Non-unique solutions, laser misalignment, galactic drift —all the obvious errors— there could be a litany of reasons. But everything checked out, even down to the algorithm minutia: small floating point errors, errant factors of two, pi roundout... Earth plus-or-minus a few million kilometers, the Victoria's location had 'zeroed.'

"You think I'm home? Are you fucking serious?"

Mars's red blotch, the four dots of Jupiter's Galilean moons, the jaundiced blur of Venus, a quick pan of the sky revealed nothing recognizable. The constellations didn't lie, however. There was a navigator malfunction and a massive one. The algorithms were corrupt; something was inexcusably wrong. If star fields weren't unique, modern extra-solar metrology was endemically flawed.

"How in hell?" Zara snarled, hands balled into fists. "How, goddamn it?" Grabbing a nearby coffee bulb, she threw it at an instrument screen, smashing it. Tears welled. She curled fetal-like in the cockpit's gravity chair.

Somewhere in the bowels of Lagrange's celestial navigation center, some astrophysicist had made one big fucking mistake. The answer to her conundrum lay in space-time physics, relativistic mechanics, and tensor calculus, but Zara was not a theoretician; she was a pilot.

"Always easier getting in than getting out," Zara muttered the off-repeated Legion mantra.

Desperation flooded in, a mix of homesickness and hysteria. Zara hiccuped as she sobbed. The Pilot implant, the lost decade, the crippling loneliness, and now this... Fuck ego, fuck passion and pride, she just wanted to go home.

#

'Who made you?'

Zara awoke. Still night, Xanadu's malformed moon filled cabin. She massaged her neck and spinal jack. Transients—voltage buildup on the connectors—caused misfires from time-to-time. The result was phantom sense: taste, touch, smell, and occasionally sound. She rubbed her fingers over the socket to ground the pins.

The cool static persisted, the tinnitus louder now. Ear ringing was a side-effect of the Pilot implant but never auditory hallucinations. Zara unfolded the umbilical and inserted it. With a click, she cycled the power. Like Shiva, a thousand arms unfolded around her as the Victoria's sensorium reset.

'Where do you come from?'

Zara strapped the nurse to her thigh and felt the pinprick. The sooth of a pharmaceutical soup squeezed through the catheter. A mix of anti-psychotics and metabolic ballast, the drugs stabilized the implant. Closing her eyes, she waited for numbness.

'Are you a hybrid?'

"—Quiet," Zara whispered.

No one knew the Pilot's long-term effects. In early recovery, schizophrenia was a danger, but months on, only migraines and mild déjà vu persisted. Voices in her head? A far-cry. Some other psychosis was at work, the afterimage of a dream or a drift-dive echo perhaps. Groggy, she dispensed a bulb of coffee and floated up to the flight deck.

'Do you mate with it?'

The voice was clearer, intonations in a language that defied linguistics. Words filtered through in meaning only. The speech wasn't phonetic, but wrought from pheromone instinct.

"Leave me alone!" Zara shouted.

Like feverish babble, the voice mumbled incoherently. For now, questions flowed one way. Whatever it was, the disembodied mouth had little druthers about getting personal.

'Is this your queen?'

"I can't understand you," Zara answered. "You're not real."

Silence.

Toggling the central breaker, she took Victoria subsystems offline. She wanted the ship quiet. In the dimmed cockpit, Zara slipped into the gravity chair, and via umbilical tested the alarms and cycled the audible emergency protocols.

'Danger: Main reactor shutdown imminent... Danger: Cabin depressurization in progress... Danger: fire in coolant exchanger...' the calm automated voice betrayed the dire warnings.

"That's not it," Zara said, disappointed.

An hour passed, but the paranormal voice did not return.

Too unnerved to fall back asleep, she checked the navigator's progress. After recompiling the algorithm, she attempted another go at manipulating the data on the odd chance one of its thousand subroutines had failed to build properly. Anything was worth a shot. Still tired, her itchy eyes blurred. With two hours left to process, she slumped back and gazed out the window. The Xanduvian night lay hidden beyond the flight deck's cupola, another half-hour until sunrise.

'You warm with the sun, like us.'

Zara popped awake. The reflection in the window of the cockpit's instrument faded in the predawn, replaced by a pair of raspberry eyes. She gasped and reached for her pistol. Startled, the alien's wings hummed to life. The creature hovered for a moment then disappeared.

Scrambling into her gear, she clambered through the airlock.

"Come back!"

But it was too late. The voice in the night had fluttered away.

[CP] CHAPTER FOUR

Zara stretched out and felt the cool of the sheets. She'd slept like the dead. Normally a tosser, her duvet remained neat and unwrinkled. Knocking into the nightstand, she clumsily reached for her glass, but it was gone. The joke of many boyfriends, her bedside water habit was a neurotic—if not obsessive—bedtime must.

Slumped with head in hands, she sat up bemused and feeling sick. Her mind buzzed with after-image. Like sand slipping through fingers, the dream dissolved. The barrier was permeable, her alter-conscious almost attainable. But alas the epic dream remained opaque.

Her apartment was dark; the Nocatarium windows dimmed. Stumbling to the bathroom, she grew dizzy. She leaned against the counter and looked into the mirror. Tangles of hair clung to her cheeks and forehead, clothing sucked wet against the curves of her body. Confused, she pulled at her undershirt. Standard Legion issue. Clothes—even underwear—annoyed her; she always slept naked. Someone had put her to bed.

Zara gulped a glass of water and sifted through the mental murk trying to reconstruct the pre-blackout. Drunk? Doubtful, those days were over. On the counter next to the sink was a triage kit missing two ampules of morphine. Leaning into the mirror, she checked the inside of her arms. No needle marks. She was clean.

Bruises and red dimples ringed her neck. Zara tore off the shirt with a moaning scream. More yellow contusion and welts along her back and rib

cage. A bloodstained bandage bridged her sternum. Her breath quickened. She slipped a finger under the tape and tore it free. Four bloody claw marks streaked her chest.

"Jesus Christ."

In shock, Zara stripped off the unwelcome nightwear and stumbled into the shower. Stings faded with the hot dribble of lumpy drops. In the steam, she breathed deep and struggled to dredge up the ephemeral. Minutes —maybe an hour— passed as she sat in the shower stall.

Fragments returned. Empty hallways filled with the echo of boot heels and intercoms, she could hear it. There was a phosphorous smell, moon dust odor mixed in with mothballs. Malik was with her. She was back at the Pyramid. Like the slow flood of ocean tide, the memory churned.

"I was drift-diving."

She didn't remember waking. Breaks in drift-dive inductions had to be controlled. The sunrise goggles were integral, or the Pilot would not work. The risk was psychosis. What kind of drift-dive fuck-up could possibly have led to this; another crash? ...this time real as opposed to faked? Her wounds looked more like a mauling than accidental.

As the morphine leached away, pain blossomed. A clean flight uniform and starched underwear helped to hide the humiliation. Hungry for explanation, Zara dialed Malik's office but received no response. She would have to tram in to the Pyramid if she wanted answers.

The overheads flickered to life as she stepped into the hall. Zara yelped. A man —a junior airmen by his rank— sat snoring in the lounge across the

way. Malik had ordered a guard? Zara quietly closed and locked her door then skulked past.

Down in the station, she took note of the waiting passengers. Mostly officers and a few of the Noctarium's genetic researchers, none paid her any mind. Zara traced her route on the Lake's tram map, a disorienting color-coded circuit filled with lines and bubble stops. Two stops, a transfer at the Arc, then five more stops to the Pyramid. She had made the commute hundreds of times, but now the mental route had all but vanished.

After a quiet ride, the tram pulled into the Pyramid's station. She flashed her credentials to a gendarme and was quickly waved on. A quick body scan and she was through. The Pyramid, like its namesake, was a massive tetrahedron bunker of reinforced basalt and amalgam. A command center designed by Legion engineers to absorb and redirect a nuclear burst, the structure would undoubtedly outlast its Giza counterparts.

Two more manned checkpoints, three retinal scans, and a chroma-type DNA identifier brought her to the Pyramid's special programs bays. Lines of Avengers dangled in their jigs awaiting retrofit. A few areas were completely curtained off, their purpose held at higher classification levels. Like all Moon hangars, the brimstone reek of regolith hung in the air.

"Are you here for the brief?" a guard asked.

"Steel Monkey?" Zara queried.

"No, Black Dawn."

"I can't remember the name. Malik wanted me here as a consultant," Zara half-lied.

The guard flipped through the database, silently keying in query information. His head shook as he looked up. "You're on the debrief list."

Technically, you no longer have a need-to-know, so..."

"—I still have access, right?"

The guard nodded.

"Good," Zara headed for the meeting room doors as the guard started to protest.

She thumbed the door scanner and slid inside. The guard did not follow. The briefing chamber was empty except three Avenger pilots sitting up front. Malik stood at a lectern delivering a flight dossier. Noticing Zara quietly standing in the back, he paused then continued.

It was a clandestine mission, one Zara was familiar with, a Trade commission to enforce embargo through unconventional means. 'Sandblasters' they called them, specialized ordnance delivery from orbit. Like pin balls, the explosive bearings rattled through a ships' hulls scouring it clean of 'soft material.' It was a way of ridding a structure of its fleshy occupants while preserving its 'strategic and commercial value.'

"You'll be performing partial re-entry for twenty minutes. The Republic of Upper Volta intends to break Trade's blockade using four pirated cargo vessels, three of which are carrying unsanctioned rice."

Typical enforcement tactics, Upper Volta had kicked out a Trade agribusiness, charging them with price-fixing. Trade was not buying the allegation, their tribunal allowing the multinational to desist its charter as a punitive measure. Facing mass starvation, local magistrates contracted with rogue pro-unionists to import foodstuffs. Legion, under the auspices of Trade, had been called in to enforce. "Their black

market jammers are active, so radar will be useless. You'll be coming in hot. Guidance will be provided via laser-link to Lagrange," Malik continued. "This is the second trial of the Sandblaster. We expect better results than last time. -Zara..." The three pilots turned to the back of the room. "-you've looked over Black Dawn's telemetry data. Do you have anything else to add?"

Surprised, she mumbled an answer. "The hypersonic payload becomes chaotic near the exosphere -I noticed that- I would calibrate inertial guidance at two hundred kilometers instead of three. The previous team had difficulty with accuracy."

"An understatement," Malik smirked as he finished the brief.

The first Black Dawn run had been a debacle for Kerala's ministers. Dislodging a communist faction from an illegal water siphoning operation seemed doable, but the pump station was actually a sewage treatment plant, and the guerrillas were twenty kilometers away. After the Sandblaster destroyed the village, the pipeline ruptured, spilling thousands of tons of sewage into the Backwater. The resulting cholera outbreak was epic.

Malik discussed vehicle prep then dismissed the pilots. All sous-lieutenants, they limply saluted Zara on their way out. Malik, his broad cheeks and wide eyes rapt, suggested she step into his office a few bulkheads down.

"Where's Deloy?" Malik asked, closing the door. "He was to escort you in when you woke up."

"He's fresh up from the Well, isn't he?" Zara forced a smile. "Not used to thirty hour days?"

"He was asleep?" Malik shook his head, chagrined.

Zara nodded. "Snoring like an idiot."

"How are you feeling?"

"Like I've been gang-raped by a bunch of hangar apes—How should I feel?"

"—That is not something to joke about!" Malik shouted, his finger pointed at her. "To insinuate such a thing, it's..."

"—How should I feel then? It doesn't take much imagination. Waking up loaded on morphine, mind blanked, and beat to shit, claw marks across my chest..."

"—Self inflicted," he interrupted.

"What?"

"Your chest... you tore at your restraints," Malik pantomimed.

"And what about the bruising, the fingernails on my neck, the burst eye vessels, the muscle pain...?"

"Sit." Malik motioned to a lounge. He turned down the office intercom and sat with his hands neatly folded. "You've been through the Legion's interrogation and resistance training, correct?"

"It's a flight school requirement."

A month spent in Guyana's flooded jungle, a wretched outpost and center of Legion's Ariane heavy-lift port, Zara couldn't forget it.

Her trainer and mock interrogator had been a cleft-chinned bitch with a hypersonic hairdo and something to prove. Inflicting psychological trauma in the form of her confidential dossier, she had picked at old scabs, mentioning her father repeatedly. The insect pits, the swamp cages, and daily beatings paled in cruelty.

"You fell unconscious during the drift-dive session."

"An interrogation session?" Zara interrupted.

Malik nodded. "Drift-diving is a substitute for sleep. The semi-conscious mind is more reactionary, more child-like," he said, his baritone calm and measured. "The amnesiac is susceptible to exploitation. Legion views it as a potential risk if the subject is captured."

"You're worried I'm going to leak Titan's secrets to our Alpha Proxima enemies?" Zara spat sarcastically. "Are we concerned some primordial xeno-algae might be harboring anti-Trade sympathies?"

"—Stop," Malik dismissed her joke with a wave. "You know Legion's concern. We needed to know if the Pilot holds up under duress. Data breaching is a risk."

"And did I breach?"

Malik shook his head. "Not exactly."

"What's that supposed to mean, or can't you discuss it?"

"The session was classified."

"Like last time. I get it," Zara snapped. "And what was the nature of the questions? Can you tell me that much?"

"Titan related, but the particulars I'm not at liberty to disclose."

Zara shook her head.

"The interrogators were using a water technique and you struggled," Malik continued. "The contusions are a result of the restraints. You tore at them, but counter-woven nylon does not tear. You were passing out, so we halted the session."

"Then you shot me full of dope and dumped me back home," Zara blurted, "a grade six test pilot treated like a crack whore."

"—Enough! No more insinuations. You were not abused."

"Abuse is relative word."

"Don't mock me, lieutenant."

"—Listen, Malik," Zara said, exasperated and resigned. "All I want to know is, why the drift-dives aren't flight simulations? The program seems more preoccupied trying to drown Victoria's test pilot than insuring the success of humankind's foray into interstellar space."

Before Lagrange, Malik had Zara wired into the Victoria simulators daily. After implant surgery, her piloting skills were supposed to segue into drift-diving, a phenomena of lucid associative response that resembled osmosis. Early on however, simulator logs showed massive lag during relativistic super-cruise, a dangerous sign.

On one occasion, she had failed to maintain flux control inside the reactor, causing the starboard Titan drive to detonate, a catastrophic virtual event. In drift-dive, Zara was a klutzier version of herself. Lacking sufficient simulator time was a liability. But for whatever reason, Titan's chief engineers failed to share her urgency. In fact, they were glibly fatalistic.

Malik paused, casually tapped his desk console, and scrolled through a schedule. "We have you slated for another drift-dive three days from now at Lagrange Hanger-Two."

"Hangar Two, the Victoria... you keep mentioning that, but you never mention what's in Hangar One? Classified too, I'm guessing?" Malik did not answer, filling the moment with awkward quiet.

Zara offered another question. "And this drift-dive session... it's a flight simulation?"

Malik nodded.

"That's a welcome change...considering."

"Do you want me to apologize?" Malik humphed. "I apologize then. I'm sorry you had to wake up that way; it was not my intention. I just can't emphasize enough Legion's security concerns over Titan."

"It's not a weapon, Malik."

"—Not yet."

Zara leaned back and said nothing. He was right. All technology —no matter how benevolent or unintended— could and would be transformed into a weapon eventually.

"Fine, understood," Zara sighed. "And when I can expect this brain-dabbling sideshow to be over with? Because, if I wake up like that again, I'm done. Out."

"You'll face courts-marshal. You don't have a choice. You will do what the program requires you to do. It's in the contract" The seriousness of Malik's reply made Zara take pause. "This peripheral training regiment will be over once other assets become available."

"Assets. You mean you have other Guinea pigs. Anyone I know?"

"Perhaps."

"But of course you're not at liberty to discuss it."

Malik nodded. "Can I ask you a question, lieutenant?"

"Go ahead."

"Why did you join Legion, dilettante Sorbonne girl like yourself? I would think there would be adequate excitement smoking hash, protesting in

the streets, and philosophizing in coffee houses to satisfy a young woman. But instead you dropped out, a promising math student."

Zara thought for a moment then replied, "boredom."

"Somehow I doubt that."

"Why did you join Legion, Malik?"

"Civil war in The Gambia, my family fled to Dakar after my sister was killed. I worked for Transcorp, enlistment into Legion was easy after that," Malik explained nonchalantly. "You're changing the subject."

"Perhaps."

Malik had turned the tides, her anger and humiliation quickly cordoned by programmatic bureaucracy. Like quicksand, the more she struggled, the fewer her options. Something had gone wrong during drift-dive and Malik wasn't talking. Concerned her inquiries would disqualify her flight status, she would have to work clandestinely if she wanted answers. Infiltrating her own drift-dives however would be tough.

"Bardu was at my interrogation, wasn't he?"

"Why do you ask?"

"He was tight with Specialist Renard. I'd be out for a little revenge if I were him. I killed his mate."

"Drop it, Zara."

#

Zara pulled the orchid from the cocktail. A beautiful lunar variety, its lip and sepals serified into extraordinary curly-cues. On world, collectors craved the rare Moon flower. Bids skyrocketed as investors pumped money into the market, but transport proved the weak link. The flowers perished on descent. A whole science

developed around preserving them for transit but to no avail. An orchid worth thousands was now reduced to julep drink garnish. Zara set it down, took a sip, and gazed out over the Noctarium.

The locals called it the 'Treehouse', a Noctarium lounge perched atop an islet in the central pond. Its glassed-in Lanais looked over the lunar boscage. A casual Moon safari, it was one of the Lake's best-kept secrets. With Zara's chronic estrangement, she indulged its alien weirdness.

"Are you waiting for someone?"

"Yes, but I'm early. It's a good excuse to hang out," Zara replied. "When I was at Lagrange, I got a little homesick for this place. Strange, huh?"

"Not really." Anton replied. "I waited on a crowd of Nagasaki wayfarers the other night who confessed to me they'd rigged their trip just to visit the Noctarium."

"I can believe it."

"So, have you figured out what those guys are doing down there?" Anton asked, gazing out the glass through his coiffed bangs.

Zara looked out and saw a huddle of researchers, three men setting up glow lamps and camera gear in the mushroom shadows. "Observing the leporid migration, I think. The creatures swim across the pond to the islet here to mate. That's if the bullcrocs don't eat them first."

Anton smirked. "You should work in the Noctarium as a scientist, Zara. To hell with all that Buck Rogers nonsense."

"Right," Zara smiled.

"Another?" Anton pointed at the empty highball. She nodded.

High in the vines, a squawking troop of evols dangled over a copse of toadstools. Annoyed, the crew shooed them with mud clods but only succeeded in whooping them into frenzy. Armed with a spark pistol, one of the men fired a warning shot. Blinded, the evols cowered.

Minutes passed until the ruckus subsided. Like wildebeest on the Mara, a herd of leporids emerged from the fungal fronds and huddled at the shoreline. Their paranoid ears twitched as they readied for the plunge. A few meters out, the bullcrops waited.

Zara sipped her julep and scooted to the glass. The researchers set the cameras to record as the leporids dribbled into the pond and fanned out. It didn't take long for a bullcrop to uncoil its hydrostat and pull a panicked creatures under. Another of the amphibians joined, and soon the water was a froth of carnage. The cameraman panned the spray while the others took notes. Enthralled, the men failed to notice an evol creeping up from behind. Zara tapped the glass, but the hoots and screeches drowned her out.

"What's going on?" Anton walked over from the bar.

"An evol's going for their spark pistol. Look."

"No shit?" Anton leaned over and squinted.

"See. Right there," Zara pointed, "near the power rack."

"I'd heard they were thinking about culling them."

"Poorly engineered misfits." Zara again tapped on the glass. "Hey!"

The evol reached up and pulled the sparker from the crate. Propping the unwieldy weapon against a rock, the creature honed its bulging eyes and

fired into the water. A column of steam exploded, sucking detritus and brack into a geyser. The dismembered bullcroc bobbed in iodine-colored water, dead lepunoids floating in whirls. The evols waded out and hauled the electrocuted creatures into the Noctarium's canopy. Easy pickings.

"Migration aborted," Zara cracked.

With their study ruined, the scientists kicked over their gear in frustration. One of the men shook his fist and cursed the wall of glowing evol eyes.

"I've worked here a year now and have never seen such a thing," Anton exclaimed.

"They should have known; they made the things. Evols are smart that way. Good little tool users."

A cull seemed the next logical step. Bred for assassination, the evols frightened the geneticists; they learned too quickly. Not only was the Noctarium's leporid population shrinking, but so were the evols competitors, like the bullcrocs. With the domes' balance out of whack, the extraterrestrial ecology was failing.

"Sorry, I'm late," Pierre said, sliding into the booth. Still in his suit and tie, he was out-of-place in the casual lounge. "I've never been here before. I've heard about it, but..."

"—One of the Moon's seven wonders... that and polymaide UV resistant condoms," Zara smirked. She couldn't resist.

Sore, and a little exhausted, Zara suggested Pierre come out to the Noctarium. Uptight at the notion, he relented with the promise that she submit to a full scan back at HIL. Zara liked Pierre. His adolescent naivete and meticulous quirks inspired her. Like a cautious kid brother

hellbent for rules, he soothed her reckless nature.

"What'll you have?" Anton asked, sliding back over to take Pierre's order.

"Just a tonic."

"No vodka or gin? The Tour de Jardin's has a fine lemon infused botanical, very nice," Anton offered.

"—Pierre, you could definitely use a drink," Zara added.

"I get headaches, thanks," Pierre replied curtly.

"Just a tonic and another Julep, Anton," Zara ordered.

"You shouldn't drink while you're on medication," Pierre whispered.

"If I was taking my medication..."

Pierre's mouth fell wide.

After her first visit to HIL, she decided to taper her regiment, specifically the anti-deja vu Thialexol. Without Julian, the chronic need to verbalize her episodic estrangement faded. Leveraging past LSD indiscretions, Zara figured the mind had an uncanny knack for accommodating altered realities, no matter how augmented.

"All of them?"

"Just the Thialexol."

"Is it the migraines?"

Zara shook her head.

"Why then?"

"I want to remember. Something's going on during drift-dive."

"Like what?"

Zara pulled down her collar and showed Pierre the bruising.

"Jesus..." he grimaced. "What the hell happened?"

Zara explained the interrogation, the morning after, and her conversation with Malik.

"Have you seen a doctor?"

"A flight surgeon checked me out, so I was told. I was unconscious and on morphine at the time."

"And how's the pain?"

She shrugged.

"I'd recommend you have Legion consult with me, but with the static I'm getting, I'm lucky they're allowing me to have access to you at all. Tell me what they've prescribed for the pain?"

Zara went down the list of pills, injections, and fluids. Pierre pulled out his console, keyed in her daily regimen, and checked the pharmacology. He shook his head and sighed. With Zara's mix of alcohol and Legion-supplied narcotics —coupled with her refusal to take the full Thialexol dosage— she risked Pilot rejection.

As he lectured, she sipped her julep and gazed out the window. The researches had packed up. Nothing was left except a scattering of leporid carcasses and bullcroc flotsam. The evols were clinical in their butchery. Zara admired them.

"It'll take time to process," Pierre said, folding up his console. "I'll send you a message when the dosage update."

"Since I've tapered the Thialexol, my dreams..." Zara tried to find the words. "After this last drift-dive —during that morphine induced coma— I had this experience..."

"About the interrogation?"

"No... —I don't know," Zara shrugged, confused. "No details; I couldn't remember anything. But it was vivid, the colors, sensations, smells, both

epic and sad. I think it was a puzzle, some Freudian code. If I could just 'bleed' a little..."

"—Enough. Opiates are psychoactive depending, and those Titan fools had you doped. The dreams are nothing but Rorschach images, order from chaos. You're experiencing synaptic 'twitches,' a byproduct of the brain's energy function as it unlearns."

When agitated, Zara noticed Pierre's habit of shielding himself with egghead babble. At times, he was book-smart smug, a quirk she found unattractive.

"A bit of a killjoy, Pierre, you won't entertain the idea?"

"Not in good conscience. It would be ripping off a scab. Just because you're not clinically paranoid now, doesn't mean you've healed. Pilot rejection is still an imminent risk."

"Let's say I follow doctor's orders." Zara gestured toward Pierre. "If I keep up with the Thialexol —and everything else— is there another way?"

"Another way to what?"

"To remember my drift-dives. HIL must still have hardware lying around?"

Pierre slumped down in his seat and sipped his tonic. Like a tumbling hourglass icon, the obsessive finger-twirl of his stylus pen indicated deep thoughts. Moments later, he pulled out his console and flipped through a few screens, the LCD flicker an electrical candle.

"Well...?" Zara said, impatient.

"Dredging up old dive sessions is like remembering forgotten dreams. You can continue to risk bleed —against my recommendation— but the

recall is flawed. Using the sunrise goggles and the mnemonic cues, hypnotic therapy is a possibility, but..." Pierre paused.

Her drift-dives were classified, the cues used to bring her in-and-out of sessions safeguarded. Zara would have to infiltrate and steal the data and then walk it out of data control. To do so, she needed a co-conspirator, someone with access to Titan's databases. Espionage possibly –a crime most definitely– Zara needed to gauge the risk.

"But what?"

"It's called a spinal shunt. The Pilot implant dovetails into your umbilical stump –it has to– if it didn't, you wouldn't be able to control the Victoria –or any spacecraft– while drift-diving. To test the implant, Akira Katsuhiko and his researchers recorded the micro-voltages from a test subject's spinal jack for comparison," Pierre explained.

"How do you replay the recordings?"

"We invert and broadcast the recorded voltage back through the umbilical. It recreates your sensorium, but the bandwidth's not great. Those streams were never meant to carry high density visual and audio information."

"Is there anyway to replay without the mnemonics?"

"No. It's the key that opens the lock."

"I see," Zara paused, brow wrinkled.

"Do you have access to them?"

"No... It would take some work," Zara said, grossly understatement the chore. "So, HIL's never tried this before?"

Pierre shrugged. "Not on human beings. We experimented on a few genetically modified Rhesus

Macaques and an evol or two, but the results didn't bear fruit."

"I don't..." Zara pinched her eyes, confused. "What does that mean 'didn't bear fruit'?"

"The fusing of the limbic and dorsal streams corrupted perception: the wiring was bad —are you familiar with Lysergic Acid Diethylamide, or LSD?"

"I spent a couple of winters on Ibeza, so..." Zara joked.

Pierre flashed a klutzy grin then continued. "Well, the monkeys and evols had a 'bad trip'. Some didn't come out of it." Pierre gesticulated trying to reassure. "But they didn't know what we were doing to them; they weren't aware. If you know what to expect —if the mind is prepared— replay isn't a problem."

"Comforting," Zara smirked.

Pierre went on to explain the device. Like an adapter, the shunt bridged the umbilical and the spinal jack, intercepting the streams. Discreet enough, the device resembled a small dongle. After a session, Pierre could replay the drift-dive in real-time using the device's modest memory.

"You really want to know, don't you? The drift-dives..." Pierre asked. "You have to know what went on."

"Yes."

"And what about the mnemonics?"

"I'm working on it."

Minus the bruises and scratches, more was at stake than Zara could admit. The wayfarer's less-than nuanced solicitation for information about her father, and Zara's thirst for an answers was the true impetus.

"Fair enough," Pierre replied. "But if you get caught, they'll trace that device back to me."

"I won't get caught."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because if I do, they'll pull my clearance, kick me off Titan, and Alpha Proxima's just a dream. I have to Pilot the Victoria. There's no other option," Zara said, her fists clenched, eyes glaring.

"Why is that, Zara?" Pierre asked suspiciously.

"Because, if I don't..." she paused, "I won't be able to live with myself."

#

Zara awoke in her clothes curled up under the duvet. She had drifted off, in mid-sentence no doubt, as she was prone to do. The angel trumpets and devil trombones of New Orleans Dixieland cycled through on the sound system, the Franc Pinoit's late-night jazz of her youth. Listening to the old albums was guilty pleasure.

On the way out, Pierre had turned the lamps down and refilled her ice packs. She didn't know why she'd invited him over –guilt –loneliness –curiosity. Clean exits and cord cutting were easy habits –relationship segues that lacked complication– but years of interstellar solitude weighed heavy.

Like Zara, Pierre was a wanderer. Drifting from one far-flung post to the next, his short-duration fellowships offered an excuse for self-imposed exile. As a person with one hand firmly on the escape hatch, Zara could relate.

Her goal at first was to keep Pierre talking, avoid awkward silences. His nasally drone soothed her as he riffed on about pop-science minutia. Somewhere in the ebb and flow, she'd let slip that Julian had left her. Managing to side step the cathartic rehash, Pierre let the topic go, much to

Zara's relief. However as the evening wore on, he eventually noticed the inevitable.

"In there..." he pointed to the toilet. "Why did you remove your bathroom mirror?"

"No reason," she replied, curt.

Pierre shook his head and smiled. "We only met a few weeks ago, but I know that's not true."

"I don't like the way I look," she admitted.

"The bruises?"

She shook her head.

"But you're a pretty girl."

Never good with compliments, Zara looked away.

"Then why?"

"Something's off... my face, it's not right."

Fear was too simple, agnosia too esoteric –too clinical. Her reflection was out-of-joint. Wrong. To explain it would trivialize it. A temporal gap distorted her image, a physiognomy unearned.

"You don't like what you see?"

Nose wrinkled, she fumbled for words. "It makes me anxious. My heart races. My skin is clammy..."

"Months of relativistic flight, perpetually awake, your destination uncertain –Jesus, Zara, I can understand a little anxiety," Pierre empathized.

Zara smiled and rubbed her eyes. "That's the funny thing. It's not the mission, fear of the future, fear of the unknown, all that. It's a fear of the past."

"Painful memories, trauma, that kind of thing is common."

"–No," Zara was adamant. "That's not it; that's not what I'm talking about. There's a voice screaming at me through time, and it's telling me that I should not be here, that I should not exist here."

Pierre sat quiet, his balding head creased with thought. An academic, Zara could tell he was trying to make sense of it all. Defying neurology and any normal psychology, he failed to diagnose her dilemma.

"Fucked up, right?"

"A little Camus, sure," Pierre smiled. "Sounds like you need an existential philosopher, and I doubt HIL has one of those on retainer."

"Anyhow, that's the reason for the mirror," Zara said, nodding at the empty niche in her kiosk. "...since you asked."

"It's most likely a side-effect of the Pilot."

"Either that or I'm spending too much time around anti-matter," Zara joked, her eyes heavy with sleep.

"How's that?"

"I'm the anti-Zara," she slurred, nodding off. "Looking for the real Zara, so we can both annihilate."

[CP] CHAPTER FIVE

The Far Side, two weeks on station and Bardu was ripe. Clearing out a unionist stronghold, he and his fireteam had spent sweaty hours disarming the saboteur's handiwork. Never ones for straight-up fights, the unionist's loved booby-traps. Bardu couldn't blame them. With a planet's worth of firepower, Legion was no contest for the CGT ragtags in a conventional scuffle. Rumor was LISP needed the concrete ruin for 'tactical speculation,' whatever that meant. He was just glad to be back at the Lake.

He removed his pressure suit and stepped into the shower. Cool water poured over him washing away the stink. Despite the vacuum, the Moon's surface baked in daytime with no wind to draw the heat. Crowded in a bivouac pod with two other grunts, the reek was unbearable. Luckily, there had been no actual shooting. Under Legion regulations sapper duty didn't count for combat pay; he could have earned more sitting behind a desk.

"Off to the races, eh?" Rutan winked, shutting his locker.

"How's that?" Bardu asked, stepping from the shower.

"Throwing a little money at the fillies?"

"Right," Bardu winked.

"What's her name?"

"Nhung, she's upstairs from the Tet Kmher. I think the madame owns the place. Food's shit but no one goes there to eat," Bardu said, toweling off his high-and-tight.

"Good, huh?"

"The best my friend, so good in fact, I don't even mind sloppy seconds."

Rutan laughed.

Bardu dressed in his off-duty standards, checked his weapon at the arsenal, and headed for the tram. A light commute, it was early morning for the civvy crowd. Exhausted, he popped an amphetamine tab, pulled out his flask, and took a sip. The synthetic buzz kicked in as he wandered up from the station into the Arc's thick air.

Bamboo scaffold, strobing LEDs, and steamy effluence filled the alleys of Little Saigon. Somehow —much to Bardu's amazement— the Arc's underclass had transformed the Moon's bleak sterility into a third world slum.

Like any colony, the Lake needed cheap labor for everything —builders —sewage technicians —food workers — janitors and a host of shit-jobs in between. For every filth splattered low-gravity toilet, some poor asshole had to mop it, and they all had to live somewhere.

Bardu ducked into the Tet Kmher, a six-story teetering prefab. Under the fluorescent white, stone-faced patrons sipped warm beer as they watched a faded LCD, the smell of alcohol and chicken broth heavy. Through the kitchen and up a back stairwell, he checked in at the salon where the withered madam smoked contraband cigarettes, her half-open robe revealing the sags underneath.

"Nhung?" Bardu asked.

"Room three, level four," she snapped.

Odd, Bardu thought. Nhung was usually a floor below. Past the chorus of moans, he clambered upstairs and knocked on the door.

"You must be Bardu?" A girl answered, cracking the door, her knees turned in shyly. Dressed in a pink tank top and satin shorts, she played up the naughty schoolgirl.

"I think there's a mistake." Bardu craned his neck to check the room. "Nhung, where is she?"

"She's not working tonight. My name is Trinh, and I will see to your needs." The girl's accent was thick.

"But I'm one of her regulars. Nhung takes care of me," Bardu protested, uneasy with the switch.

"Come inside." The girl grabbed at him, "Relax. Nhung told me what you like. A bit of the rough stuff, no?"

"I... I don't know."

"You'll like, I promise," she said, her bangs fluttered with the bat of her eyes.

Trinh was a pixie thin. He liked a bit of girth, especially in the ass. And Nhung was voluptuous –a rare gem in Little Saigon. With the lunar gravity, it made all the difference. Too horny to protest, he stepped inside and closed the door.

"Always game for something new, I suppose," Bardu conceded.

He flopped on to the futon as Trinh pulled off her tank top. Laced with serpent tattoos, the body art betrayed her teenage airs. He drained his flask, pitched it to the floor, and undid his fatigues. She pushed him onto the bed and draped her hair over his bare chest, nipples raking flesh.

"I could get used to this."

Trinh smiled and kissed his neck. She made quick work of his clothes, deftly removing his trousers with a quick tug. Bardu lay limp. Splayed on the

damp sheets and spread eagle, he let her work him over. With her lip caress, his mind drifted.

"Are you relaxed?" she whispered, mouth pushed into his ear.

"Oh, very."

"Good."

He didn't feel the warm steel of handcuffs slip over his wrists until it was too late. With a lurch, he struggled to sit up. Chained to the frame, he lacked leverage. Trinh had him pinned.

"What the fuck?"

"You like it rough, no?"

"Maybe, but Jesus. I can't even..."

"Don't fight it," she said, small hands pushing against his chest. "Relax."

Catching his breath, he eased back. Her almond eyes locked on to his as she monkey-crawled down to his nether region. Teeth clinched around his waistband, she tore at his briefs. Bardu chuckled. Nhung obliged a little slapping and hair pulling, but never bondage. Trinh was a nastier firecracker.

"I'm starting to like you, my pet."

She cuffed his ankles as well. He was wholly at her mercy, naked and crucified. Kneading flesh, a few more baby kisses, and the foreplay came to an abrupt halt.

He opened his eyes. Trinh lorded over, her pose menacing. He tugged on the cuffs but felt the pain of ankles and wrist-bones pinched by steel. Grimacing, Bardu waited for her to continue with the role-playing sexcapade. Trinh refused. Instead, she picked her top off the floor and put it back on.

"Tea break?" Bardu half-joked. "Come on little sister, You can't keep a guy waiting. Enough's

enough!"

"Three hundred!"

"What? No way!" Bardu cackled. "Two hundred tops. You're a sassy little snapdragon, but you've not impressed me yet."

"Two seventy-five," Trinh shouted.

"Okay!" Bardu gave in. "Two fifty! I didn't get combat pay this tour. That's all I can afford."

"Suit yourself," she said, then headed for the door.

"All right, two seventy-five," Bardu relented.

Trinh lightly knocked. The door opened. Someone waited outside. Dressed in a legionnaire fatigues, the woman walked in carrying an aluminum cylinder attached to a hose and wand.

"You're shitting me!" he smirked. "Zara? If you were looking for a little manage-atrois, you didn't have to chain me to a bed. I'm open-minded."

"Fuck off, Bardu." Zara kicked the door closed.

Trinh turned on the articulated bed lamp and swung it into his face. Blinded, he squinted through the light. Zara sat down on the futon next to him. She was holding a nitrogen dewar, the cap spitting frozen fog from a release valve.

"What you got there? You into kinky shit, Zara?"

"This..." Zara said, squirting a cone of frost from the wand-spigot, "makes the best Pho you could imagine. The frozen nitrogen lumps the vegetable oil and thickens the broth. Trinh's family's makes the stuff downstairs –it's terrific – but you don't come here for the food, so you wouldn't know."

Bardu worried. Malik –or whoever– had leaked the interrogation recordings and somehow Zara had fingered him as the muscle. No secret really, as a

briefed member of Titan, he'd worked interrogations before.

"You looking for a little revenge, Zara?"

"No," she replied, her boyish face all business.

"I don't believe you."

Zara shrugged. "Believe whatever."

"Then why are you doing this?"

"—Trinh, will you do the honors?" she said, ignoring him.

The girl mounted Bardu, straddling his naked body. Zara pulled a camera from a zip pocket and circled the bed taking pictures. Sexy-like, Trinh hovered over him, striking randy poses.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm uploading these photos to an anonymous account, a little insurance policy," she said, keying something into the camera. "How quickly do you think it would take security to pull your tickets? Nothing like a little blackmail to extort a briefed agent, right? At the mercy of an expat, strung up, naked, quite the security concern, wouldn't you say?"

"You wouldn't..." Without a viable clearance, Bardu could be sent down the Well to slog it, fighting guerillas in some sub-Saharan furnace.

Zara nodded. "I would."

"I was just doing my fucking job," he bellowed. "Malik ordered me."

"Like I said, I'm not here for revenge, Bardu."

He remained unconvinced.

"How much, Trinh?" Zara asked as the girl jumped off Bardu.

"Two seventy-five, this limp asshole wouldn't go any higher," she pouted.

"I'll wire it to your account."

"—Hey!" Bardu protested.

"—Hey, what?" Zara snapped.

"What do you want from me?"

Zara put away the camera and pulled up a collapsible chair next to the bed. Trinh grabbed the dewar from the floor. Pushing the wand against sole of his left foot, the girl squeezed the spigot. The cold enveloped his toes. The boiling nitrogen sent him reeling.

"A quick burst evaporates from the skin. Repeated bursts eventually cool the flesh. Frostbite will follow then sub-dermal tissue damage and necrosis." Zara explained. "Trinh will start with your toes, then work her way up to more sensitive areas."

"You need whores to do your dirty work? I bet you don't have it in you," Bardu dared. He knew she was more than capable. Beneath the petite tomboy exterior, Zara burned with a giant's rage.

"I don't have Trinh's restraint. Be thankful she's here."

"What do you want?"

"—Answers. I want to know what went on during the interrogation."

"That's classified."

Zara nodded to Trinh. The girl let loose a long stream of vapors. Numbness gave way to ache and lack of sensation. He gritted his teeth and wiggled his toes, but felt nothing.

"Stop!"

"I want to know what happened to me." Zara leaned in, her voice calm but quick. "I want to know what questions they asked."

"That's disclosure. They'll pull my tickets!"

"They'll pull your program tickets anyway if I release those photos. Take your pick."

She had him. If he spilled, he would have a measure of insurance. If not, his sexual fetishes—real or perceived—would doom his Titan status. After a few awkward seconds, he rolled his eyes and gave in.

"What do you want to know?"

"Who beat me up?"

"—Self inflicted," Bardu sniped.

"That's the same thing Malik said, a cover story," she turned to the girl. "Trinh?"

She again doused his feet in frozen liquid. The frostbite ached. The sear of blood flow forced his eyes shut. Bardu gritted his teeth and waited for the agony to end.

"It was me!" he confessed, "and Rutan. Malik charged us with 'interrogation enhancement'." Enhancement was code, typically no less exotic than a punch or two. But rough play always had a way of escalating.

"At The Ocean of Storms after my drift-dive, Malik informed me I'd killed someone. I overheard you, something about Caporal Renard. I put the pieces together. Out for a little payback, eh?" Zara went on. "You're not one for subtlety, Bardu."

With cold professionalism, he and Rutan had worked her over while Malik observed from behind mirror-glass. She had killed one of his mates—a gruesome zero-atmosphere death—and it took all Bardu's will not drown the surly bitch. After two hours of grilling and several hits with a rubber baton, Malik ordered her to the tank.

Like a cat over a bathtub, Zara pushed back, the crown of her skull popping him in the chin. Hands clenched around her neck, he pushed her head underwater. She flailed with gurgled screams. As

she gasped, Malik shouted cryptic questions over the loudspeaker's vocal distorter. Delirious or obstinate, she refused to answer.

"You wouldn't fucking talk!" Bardu roared, teary eyed. "Not until the end."

"—What questions did they ask?" Zara asked eagerly.

"Cryptic bullshit, weird stuff, I don't remember half of it," Bardu yammered.

Zara nodded to Trinh. Another burst of frost. Bardu screamed.

"Think hard, Bardu, or Trinh moves north."

Bardu breathed deep. "Standard stuff about the Titan drives, stuff about the Victoria's technical specs, capabilities, flight data..."

Zara's eyes were wide with incredulity. "Flight data? You mean like orbital flight tests or something?"

Bardu looked at her dumb, slobber and spittle clinging to the corners of his mouth. "—I don't know."

"That doesn't make sense; that's impossible. The Victoria has only taxied, never 'flown.' Why would they ask me that?"

"To see if you'd make up shit? —Hell if I know!"

"What else?"

Bardu tried to remember. After thirty minutes in the tank, Zara spat half-drowned nonsense about angels and demons, heaven and hell. Somewhere in her mangled mind, she'd fabricated a weird Oz-like fairytale, the ramblings of a street-corner drunk. Bardu and Rutan dismissed the crazed babble, but Malik kept up the catechization, enthralled with her delusions.

"Angels and demons?" She tipped back in the chair, eyes wandering.

"Nonsense, I know. I tried to tell them that, but they wouldn't listen. Malik kept going on, asking more questions."

"They were looking for codes or something, metaphors, Freudian dream shit," Zara guessed, "some old paranoid hallucinations from my recovery. But why?"

Legion interrogations were state-of-the-art head-trips. Bardu failed to appreciate the nuance. If a subject could be reduced to insanity –no matter how brief– wrenching valuable information –no matter how warped– became easier. Like a haruspex, the task was then to sift through the mangle of chicken innards for classified breaches. So went the theory.

"That's all? That's it?" Zara asked.

Trinh crept closer, the frosted wand hovering uncomfortably close to his shrunken genitalia.

"I'm sorry!" Bardu screamed. "Renard was our mate, and you murdered him."

"Bullshit!"

"You did!"

"Goddamn it, Bardu. I didn't mean to kill the bastard. It was an accident."

"An accident? Now who's the bullshitter?"

"–Shut up for a minute," Zara roared. Silence. The quiet patter of lunar rain overwhelmed the room. Despite the Arc's heat, Bardu shivered. "You're going to do something for me."

"And if I refuse?"

Zara smiled. "Do you really want to go there?"

"Maybe."

With a grin, Trinh let a burst of blue-white explode over his groin. He felt the sweat freeze and pull at his pubic hair. Like a knee to balls, the pain was harrowing.

"Alright, alright, goddamned it!"
With that, Zara explained her plan.

#

Feeling like a refugee, she meekly knocked. The hallway was empty, the carpets stained with drunken excess. A regolith mustiness permeated the air. Most of the tier two officers' apartments functioned like transient hotels. Dirty, hallowed out, she hated the place.

An agonizing minute passed. She knocked again then cowered.

"Open up," she whispered. "Come on, Julian."

She heard a thump then footsteps. The door slid open. Bleary eyed, Julian squinted into the hallway. She smelled his deodorant warmed by his skin like pheromone; she couldn't resist. Pushing him into the darkness, she kicked the apartment's door closed and tugged at his A-shirt.

Muscles rigid, he fended her off at first but soon gave in. They tore at each other's clothes, mouths locked, snorting air. Zara remembered how he tasted, the texture of his tongue and lips. Hands cupped around his jawline, she smothered him.

Naked now, they fell into bed. Julian embraced her, manipulating her body underneath him. Zara ached as Julian entered her. Like a hot flume, warmth spilled into her. Palming his chest and stomach, she felt him breathe, excited but rhythmic.

Julian's control relaxed her. He was a careful lover, effortless able to carry her to climax in short order. Only after her banshee crescendo, would he finish, polite, slow, and calm. He timed her perfectly, playing the right notes on cue.

Post-orgasmic, he curled over on her side to spoon her, forearms tucked under her breasts. He pulled her into him and kissed her nape, his nose pressed against the pins of her spinal jack. She felt his finger trace out her Chronophage tattoo. He was curious —she could tell— but he held back. Luckily, the light was too dim to see her mottled bruises.

"Thank you," she whispered.

He quietly laughed. "For what?"

"Not asking questions."

Zara pulled the sheet over the both of them, tucking it in and around her body. She felt him fall asleep, his exhales steady and even. A common complaint of most women, Zara didn't mind his post-coital narcolepsy; the moment provided a respite from her thoughts. She was never one for pillow talk.

Unable to sleep, She looked around his apartment. Bigger than hers, it occupied the top corner of La Deuxième Tour, one of the Lake's original dormitories. A pile of his hangar gear lay strewn about near the door. Julian had always been too messy. In the Earthshine, she spotted the half-empty packet of Export As beneath a city of empty food containers.

Gently lifting his arm, she climbed out of bed and grabbed the cigarettes. A flick of the butane stove and the cherry burned red. Old, moldering, in desperate need of remodel, no one cared if you smoked in La Deuxième Tour; the rundown dump had a few perks.

Plopping down in a chair, she gazed through the panoramic glass at the Lake and the Moonscape beyond. Adjacent to the Pyramid, she watched the ant-like flurry of the hangar apes prepping the

52nd Avenger Wing. Blue-green landing lights merged with the night sky to form a seamless tapestry of celestial pinpricks.

As she smoked, she remembered.

She was sixteen, her birthday in little over a month. Down by the lake, at the abandoned winery in Lausanne, she used to drop synthetic empathogens and wander through the vineyards with her friends. Nothing grew there anymore, everything desiccated, dead. Lak Lemon's bacteria blooms put an end to wine making, the hydrogen sulfide too toxic for grape growing. Like a graveyard, it evoked an apropos melancholy.

She typically ignored her mother's pleas to check-in, silencing her phone, but not this time. Near sundown, she and her boyfriend Ueli, a slight boy, narrow shouldered with an effeminate charm, had stolen away in the shadows of an old wine cellar. In the dark, the LCD glimmered with two chilling words: your father...

Early autumn, she remembered the chill. Ueli had let her borrow his leather jacket for the walk back to the station. She'd lit a clove but was too preoccupied to smoke it. Too afraid, she couldn't call home. Listening to her sobbing mother's hysterics through the tinny earphone would have been too much.

Two CGT goons stood in the doorway when she arrived, the message in hand. Margot sat outside on the stairwell stunned and wide-eyed, an expression she wore clown-like from then on out.

Little explanation was given. Zara suspected a cover-up. CGT worked clandestine sabotage in the petroleum sector, interruption of fuel supplies to key points of infrastructure. As a union boss,

leadership required 'more commitment' from her father.

The typewritten note —allegedly from her father— spoke of his need to 'move underground' in order to carry out needed industrial action. As not to put the family at risk, he'd severed communication, or so went the excuse. After two months, the strike cheques failed to clear the bank. Calls to CGT went unanswered. Within a year, Zara gave up on the idea her father was alive.

"What are you thinking about?" Julian asked, propped up on an elbow. A rhetorical question, he knew the answer.

"I thought you were asleep," Zara said, swiveling her lounge.

"Just a nap. I wanted to say goodbye before you ducked out."

Zara never slept over. Breakfast, coffee, and idle morning chit-chat was too bourgeois.

"I was thinking about my dad?"

"And what about him?"

"About the night we heard the news."

"Oh." Julian had been down this dark alley with Zara before.

"Can I tell you something?"

"Please..." He reached out for the Export As. Zara lit a new one and passed it over.

"You can't tell anyone. Promise?"

"I'll take it to my premature grave," he smirked.

"Someone approached me recently, someone with information about him," Zara said, smoke sputtering out her mouth. "They offered a deal for Titan info."

Julian cracked a suspicious smile. "A union spy? Interesting. What did he want?"

"He wanted to know about the drift-dives, whatever I could remember."

"But you remember nothing."

"I know. That's the problem, but that could change."

"Change?" his eyebrow lifted.

"I remember stuff in bits-and-pieces, but it could all come back if properly cued."

"Like an amnesiac?"

Zara nodded and took a drag from her cigarette. "There are ways —experimental of course— to regenerate lost memories."

"So you're seriously considering espionage?"

Zara shrugged.

"They'll airlock you; you know that. You'll be nothing but frozen mist in the solar wind."

"—If I get caught."

"He probably doesn't have anything, Zara. It's sounds like a setup."

"I can ask for proof. It's a chance, a small one, but I need to know."

"Forget it. You've given too much of yourself to your old man. A unionist insurgent, he abandoned you for the cause. You owe him nothing."

Despite it being the truth, Julian's indignation irritated her. She let go; there was no point. Not a flame, but an ember, their relationship inspired little fire. Julian flicked on the bed lamp and propped himself up with a pillow.

"What happened to you?"

She snatched one of his shirts from the floor and threw it on. Half-naked, her bruises still visible, she sat back down in the lounge and pulled her legs up against her chest.

"It was an exercise, a drift-dive, a simulated crash landing or something. I got roughed up," she

mumbled. "Can you turn out the light?"

"Whatever you like," Julian said, each word like a question. With a click, the grubby apartment surrendered to twilight. "Does it hurt?"

She shook her head. "No. It's fine."

Julian shrugged and smoked the rest of his cigarette, knocking the ashes into an empty cup.

"Why did you come here, Zara?"

"Because I'm selfish," she snapped.

Julian grinned. "You always had a way with the truth."

She shrugged.

He rolled onto his back and gazed up at the ceiling. "I suppose I could revel in my brilliance," he said, gesticulating, "that me breaking up with you—as opposed to the opposite—was some malevolent scheme of reverse psychology to win you back—or at least sleep with you—but that's all bullshit, isn't it?"

It was. Just one last time couldn't hurt, she'd reasoned. Sex was an existential act, a hormonal mechanism of perpetuation—visceral—sweaty—base—pure animal. Sex was validation. Like a junkie, she remained addicted to world's trappings. Unable to find the proper eloquence, she offered Julian a simpler excuse.

"I just needed it."

"Fair enough." He paused. "Can I ask you something?"

"If you have to..."

"Did you love me at one time?"

"I think so," Zara replied, stubbing out her cigarette.

Julian's mannerisms—his verbal quirks—the way he made love—his smart ass smile, remained frozen

in time, her attraction for him on autopilot. Their relationship was a relic.

"I'll miss you," Julian admitted. "You know that. More than I think you can appreciate."

"You broke up with me, remember?"

"Yes, mutually assured destruction. It's just that..." he paused then went on. "I don't think I'll be able to handle you leaving, that's all."

"Why?"

"Because I don't think you'll make it back. I have this feeling."

And so did she.

[CP] CHAPTER SIX

Double vision, doublethink, echoes, every thought was facsimile, endlessly repeated. Inside the weightless room filled with machines, instances cycled with a ragged sanity. Bihemispheric now, Zara's brain slowly re-phased as her wounds healed.

She struggled to center thought, absorb the chaos and isolate her mind. Lagrange had hired a stress guru to prep her before surgery. Eastern philosophy applied to bleeding-edge modern neurology, energy management, chakra re-alignment, dharma fusion—it was all charlatan bullshit; none of it helped. The ceaseless rattling continued. Isolation was key to recovery, they'd told her. Embedded in her skein of catheters and tethers, Zara—barely lucid—opened her eyes and took in the post-implant world.

The lamps buried her under white-hot. The tempest chamber's twenty walls burned with a confusing aluminum dazzle. Blurry shapes resolved as her eyes focused and constricted. LEDs pulsed in rhythm with the pneumatic echo of intubators. Inside a nest of medical equipment, constructed of tubes, hoses, and a sterile harness, Zara hung cocooned.

A byproduct of the proteins sutures, the surgeon informed her post-op would be 'intense.' Gone now were the endless fever dreams. Like madness, the induced coma distorted time and fused sense. Delusional, people spoke color, voices answered in a cant of real-time calculus accented with smoky saltiness. In her own self-contained reality,

whole wars were fought. Angels and demons – indescribable in shape or form– battled for her soul.

She had been unconscious for only a matter of days but the trauma felt epic. Eons had passed. Fugue-time distorted and dilated. Awake, she would have to 're-learn' reality, so said her guru. The Pilot implant was part of her now, fully integrated and irreversible.

Submerged beneath a vast ocean, locked away from any reality, the chamber worked as a Faraday cage to negate the universe's influence. Particulates of Big Bang aftermath flowed past the dodecahedron cell, an island in the gamma stream. For all Zara knew, time had failed. She opened an eye and dared the light again. Through the fading blur, she noticed a mirror framed by one of the chamber's faceted walls. In the polished glass, she saw her reflection. Like a fly in a web, she hovered helplessly in the zero-G berth. Coagulated blood clung to the bandages, her eyes bruised with hematoma.

The incision was small, just a few stitches near her temple and crown where arthroscopic robotics had penetrated the skull. The holographic imager was still in place, its optical bridle and fluid shunts sprouting from her head like a flowerpot. Somewhere outside, beyond the mirror, a nest of ogling engineers pornographically spun and expanded the fractal curves of her frontal lobe.

Zara's stomach churned. She dribbled vomit. With a whir, a nozzle siphoned the ejected stomach contents away. Tensed with heaves, her head throbbed. Nested somewhere in the clumps of floating machinery, a pump measured dosage and

pushed opiates into her veins. Eyes aflutter, she slipped into darkness.

#

Whispers filled the chamber. Zara struggled against an indescribable doom. With her linguistic centers a tangled mess, she only managed a scream. Behind the glass, the faceless vivisected her with macabre curiosity.

Machine noise clouded the audible muck. Beeps and clicks, clacks and thumps, the cacophony conspired against her. Encrypted in the clutter, the ciphers spoke of annihilation –bible codes –apocryphal warnings of demonic numerology –a string of prime numbers followed by the Fibonacci sequence divided by some transcendental determinant.

Zara hyperventilated as she babbled. Her physiology shifted the orchestra of oximeters, sending the cardiac meters into a caterwaul. The more she struggled, the more the berth's monofibers cinched tight until she could barely move. She closed her eyes and envisioned spiders hatching from the medical equipment. Tubes stiffened and broke free to form corrugated arachnid legs. The appendages collected around clear bulbs of IV fluid to form a thorax. With monopods firmly buried into the rubbery material, the spiders wrenched themselves free. Zara felt skittering legs on her flesh. She bit her lip from the creeping tickle.

"Stop!"

She yelled the word clearly. In the newly bisected provinces of her parietal lobe, the lesions were healing and rebuilding new pathways. Speech returned. She opened her eyes again.

"Zara?"

The ghosts spoke to her.

In the mirror, hazy shapes floated behind her. The faceless apparitions wore white. Like parasites, they clung to the walls. One of the beings floated in and removed his mask. Thin but tall, she noticed the man's alien blue eyes.

"You are an imposter," Zara blurted.

"You're suffering from post-op hyperbolic paranoia. Unfortunately, I'm not going to convince you. You'll have to work through your delusions. It's part of the process," the man said, his voice viciously detached. "Do you recognize me?"

"No," Zara said, shaking her head. "Should I?"

He shrugged. "Not necessarily. Your agnosia is strong. It will linger for a time." The man, comfortable in zero gravity, pulled a cigar from his breast pocket, put it in his mouth, and bit down.

Zara gawked with bloodshot eyes.

"I know," the man said shamefully. "An old habit. Don't worry. I'm not going to light it."

"You're a ghost."

"Your brain's been fractured —split— as part of the Pilot implant. Right now, you're awake and dreaming, both hemisphere's occupying the same consciousness, but that will change. Soon, cycles of sleep and wakefulness will return, then drift-diving will begin."

"—Where's Malik?" Zara peered over his shoulder at the mirror wall. "He manages Titan, not you, whoever you are."

Zara suspected a conspiracy. The chamber was a jail cell. Deep in space, the nodes of Lagrange were modular and detachable. A group of unionist infiltrators, insinuated deep into Legion, could

conceivably detach and smuggle the recovery chamber to an undisclosed orbital stronghold.

"I don't want to upset you," the man said. "My name is Prost. I work for LISP, Legion Intelligence Services and Protocol. Are you familiar?"

"You're a spook?"

He pulled out a console from the white folds of his robe and showed her the authenticator hologram. Blurry and bright, she squinted to read his ID: 'Agent Prost, issue #: 512, reference codeword: Pompidou.'

"That could be faked," Zara snapped.

"Anything's possible," the man said, his lips pursed with calm frustration. "As neural cordoning and re-alignment commence, the Pilot implant will betray your intuition. What you're experiencing is natural."

"Natural?"

Prost smirked. "Probably not the best choice of words."

"What do you want, Monsieur Prost?" Zara sneered.

She imagined her gray matter slabbed and sliced like prime rib, CGT eggheads probing it for intelligence. Calling it an 'implant' was a ruse, a cover story the imposter used to no doubt exploit her.

"If I'm upsetting you, I'll be more than happy to leave."

"No." Zara tried to shake the paranoia. "I'm fine. My mind —my thoughts— are in runaway. I can't quiet them."

"Have you tried the exercises?"

"—Zen bullshit."

"You asked me what I wanted," the man said, shifting his cigar from one side of his mouth to the other.

"Right, Monsieur... I forgot your name."

"—Prost, Monsieur Prost."

Zara pinched her eyes, sweat beading on her brow. "Monsieur Prost, what do you want?"

"I need to ask you a few things."

"Out with it."

"We'll start slow. Just some questions to re-orient you, to see what you've retained and what you haven't." Prost switched his console's recorder on. "Tell me about your childhood, about your family, specifically about your father."

[CP] CHAPTER SEVEN

Zara spent her days asleep, fueled by sickbay Dramamine. Food containers floated about, colliding like asteroids. Discarded clothing hung haphazardly over instrumentation. More a college dormitory and less an interstellar spacecraft, the cabin a victim of her despondency. A week had slipped by. Unable to locate home, she had all but given up. But this morning was different.

She awoke, bathed, and cleaned up the clutter. Like manna, she had arrived at the idea in her dream, now obvious. If she could escape Xanadu's Lagrange point and its atmosphere, she could reacquire the star field in the vacuum of space, distortion free. It was worth a shot, and she had few options. However, as quickly as hope returned, it ebbed.

"Come on! Be there!" Zara whimpered as she checked the mass count.

A reactor re-ignition coupled with the overuse of the dionizer, had brought anti-matter levels below threshold. Without adequate deuterium and its annihilator compliment, the Titan drives could not achieve relativistic speeds. The result would be a slow cruise back to Earth, hundreds of years, far exceeding her lifespan.

Flight engineers nor Zara had planned on Xanadu. A brief flyby of Alpha Proxima was to be the sum of the mission, but the strange world had proved too tantalizing. Now, like Selkirk in the Juan Fernandez, Zara found herself marooned. To fend off the scarabs, she had programmed Victoria's

dionizers to zap the insects away. At the time, fuel management hadn't been a concern.

"Come on!" Zara roared.

She re-aligned the toroid fields and monitored the flux. The mass count failed to budge. Not only lost, her engineering neglect had stranded her in the interstellar doldrums. She cuffed away a tear. She hated crying –weak –girly –pathetic... self-pity was shit currency.

'You chitter like my sisters.'

The voice again, mechanical with a boyish up-speak. Days before, the telepathy had confused her. At first, she suspected the aural hallucinations were a byproduct of the implant. It was only after the alien had flown off did she realize the creature was trying to communicate.

"Who are you?"

Peering through a dorsal window, Zara saw nothing. However a quick check of the cameras revealed the alien perched atop the cockpit. Zara clambered into her gear and headed for the airlock. Outside, she startled the creature. It hovered up from the hull, gossamer wings vibrating to steady itself in the shifting winds. It twitched its head like a hummingbird, fast and random.

'You are like us but also like them. You are a hybrid. Did they build you?' the creature asked, his telepathic voice an odd staccato.

"Who are they?" Zara asked.

'The Masters,' it replied, one of its four hyper-articulated arms gesturing above. 'They watch over the Myr. They must be appeased.'

"I am not from here," Zara said.

'I see.'

Whether thought or spoken, the alien interpreted Zara's brain-mouth signals. The act of speaking was just pantomime. Like waves on an empathetic ether, the telepathic language worked from emotional cues. Just thinking the words sufficed. Strangely natural, it defied symbolic linguistics, phonetics, grammar, and vocabulary entirely. Out of habit, Zara felt compelled to speak with her mouth none-the-less.

"Who are you?"

'I am Xu of the Myr, as were my Cephon brothers.'

"The dying ones." She remembered the sad spectacle, the weakened creatures consumed by the horde.

Xu's mandibles clacked in what Zara guessed was the alien's nodding gesture.

"If they're all dead, why are you still alive?"

'After queening, the Regina and Proliea sisters no longer need the Cephon. We take to the Above, pay homage to the Masters in sacrifice. But some of us...' Xu paused, his mane of antennae wavering about. 'Some of us remain.'

Drawn to the his weirdness, she temporarily forgot her Crusoe predicament. Her communion with the alien had eclipsed circumstance. Besides a few ambiguous radio signals from the cosmos, no evidence for extra-terrestrial intelligence existed. But Xu was proof, and Zara was humanity's ill-equipped emissary.

Talk of sacrifice to the 'Masters' —whoever or whatever they were— spoke of a religion. The mention of a queen hinted at a higher social order. Primitive maybe, Xu and his kind were evolutionarily advanced. After more than a year of

relativistic solitude, just to communicate –to converse with another being– overwhelmed.

'You are in pain?'

"No." Zara wiped away a tear from her mask seal.

'But the water in your eyes?'

"I'm just emotional. That's all."

"Are you from the Above?" Xu gazed up at the Beanstalk, towards Xanadu's nodal world.

Zara shook her head. "I'm lost. I don't know where I am. I came from the stars."

'So you're not a hybrid...'

"A hybrid?" The species gap jumbled their telepathic vocabulary; Zara did not understand.

"No, I'm not a mix of anything, if that's what you mean. I am a human being."

His antennae wiggled. Xu struggled to understand. On Earth, sentience –other than man himself– was extra-terrestrials by definition. No other higher intelligence existed. Xanadu was different. Here, competing intelligences vied, the Masters and the Myr. Like Earth's ancient hominids, Xanadu's 'enlightened' commingled.

'Are human beings parasites?'

"Parasites?" Zara asked, trying not to take offense. "No, not exactly."

'I see.'

Coupled to the Victoria like a rasp, Xu thought her a symbiotic organism. He was correct in a way. Burrowed inside its husk and intimately linked via umbilical, Zara shared a sensorium with the spacecraft. Without her host, she would die.

Xu bobbed in the updrafts. Rainbows of gold-green shimmered over his carapace. Zara saw her face in his massive eyes, a multitude of crimson reflections. Specially designed for the aerial

kingdom, she marveled at his aerodynamic efficiency. He was a beautiful specimen.

"You asked if they 'built' me."

'Yes. The Masters build things like you,' Xu said, gesturing with three of his four arms into the sky.

"I am not a 'thing', and the Masters did not build me. My mother and father gave birth to me, and I built this," she pointed at the spacecraft.

'Like our Regina, you hatched from a queen's brood?'

"I suppose."

She had yet to meet these Masters. Whatever they were, or however they manifested, Xu made a sharp distinction.

'You live inside of it,' he pointed at the Victoria. 'And you built it.'

"Yes. My people call it a machine." For the sake of brevity, she took credit for the Einsteins, Maxwells, and Newtons of Earth's modern scientific era. "Like your wings, this ship flew me here from the stars." Zara gestured to the vertical sky.

'I see,' Xu replied, his antennae wiggling.

The Masters were the gods of Xanadu, Zara surmised, rulers of Xu's world. But unlike myth, Xu suggested the deities moved about the siamese worlds incarnate, tangible and real. If such 'god-like' beings possessed the power of creation, there was a chance they understood the complexities of nuclear physics. Desperate to get home, she could only hope.

"Can you take me to the Masters?" Zara asked. "There is a problem with my machine. It sounds like they might be able to help me."

Head twitching, his eyes shifted in color from red to purple to magenta. Xu tried to understand

Zara's proposal. 'The Regina, our queen, does not allow us to commune with the Masters.'

"I see. Is it possible to ask the queen's permission?"

'But you said the Masters did not build your machine. How can they repair such a thing if they did not create it?' Xu reasoned.

"I don't know," Zara sighed. "I'm out of fuel and I'm lost."

'I too am lost.'

Baffled, Zara gazed at the spiraling Beanstalk. "How can you be lost? There's only up and down."

'It is not a matter of where, it is a matter of how.'

"How are you lost?"

Zara listened to Xu explain. The Myr males – called the Cephens – navigated the sky using internal loadstones. Pigeon-like organ governed their equilibrium. Sensing the Beanstalk's strong magnetic fields, the Xu negotiated the weightless inter-nodal space.

'The inherited maps have deviated. A storm skewed our sense. My weakened brothers fell.'

Zara took stock of the shifting cloudscapes. Weightless sheets of rain blobbed into walls of spangle. On Xanadu, storms were brief squalls, hardly a threat to navigation. 'A storm', the way Xu implied it, held an entirely different meaning.

"What are these storms?"

'Confusion. It drove us in circles. Misguided and adrift, we succumb to the wind.' Zara remembered the brume. The Cephens plummeted like dying sparrows. Attracted by the Beanstalk's weak gravity, the aliens spiraled aimlessly.

"The Gaussian intakes..." Its mammoth electromagnetic coils, that had to be it. What else

could have created the disturbance? Desperate to fuel the hull's dionizer and ward away the beetles, she had fired up the Titans. The magnetic tempest had sabotaged the Cephens' internal compass. Without direction, they'd grown exhausted. "Those storms won't affect you any longer."

'How do you know this?'

"I created them." Zara pointed at the Guassian outriggers. "My machine confused you."

'I see.'

Zara doubted he did. "Why were you with them if you weren't to be sacrificed?"

'To bear witness. I offer testimony to the Regina, for I live longer than my Cephen brothers. It helps the queen select future broods. How we die reflects our passage through life. It is a true moment. Death honors life.'

"But how do the Cephen breed if they are dead?"

'They have already bred. The Proelia cull the pupua of the inferior after sacrifice.'

Among the Myr, no act of 'rutting' proved out the superior males. The Regine —the queen— chose her offspring posthumously, an inefficient means of evolution but no doubt effective.

"Survival of the fittest," Zara offered. "Sort of."

'Very much so.'

"What are you going to do?"

Xu gazed about then spoke. 'Without my brothers, I must return to the queen.'

"Can I go with you?"

Xu clutched his four articulated hands in a nervous gesture. Confused, the alien didn't know what to make of the request; eons and parsecs divided them. "If a lion could speak; we could not

understand him." She remembered the quote from Ludwig Wittengenstein. While able to communicate with Xu, he was utterly alien.

'Why?'

"You told me she gives permission for those seeking the Masters."

'Only the Myr males seek the Masters. You are not one of us.'

"But the Masters might be able to help me."

'The Masters do not 'help.' They build things. They are powerful. We pay homage.'

Like a plebeian, Xu did not question his queen. He executed the Regina's orders out of instinct. Surviving Xanadu required adherence to a collective will. He was a slaved appendage to a greater body. A simpler solution offered itself.

"Xu," she said. "Take me to your queen."

'Do you mean her harm?'

"No," Zara replied.

'Will you be creating any more storms?'

"Not for now."

'Then I will take you.'

#

Xu gripped Zara's waist with two of his four arms and took flight. Like a surgeon's hand, his fingers proved a snug harness. Following the Beanstalk, they fell towards Xu's hive world. The ubiquitous Beanstalk jungle made judging speed impossible. Slip streaming from one air channel to another, hours wore on, time impossible to measure by passage alone.

Zara had hastily packed a survival kit, filling a water-proof satchel with mask filters, protein bars, a nurse unit, and a purifier. Before leaving the Victoria, she'd reset her inertial compass, her Xanduvian journey referenced to the spacecraft

'zero point.' To secure the ship, she'd dislodged the vehicle from the Beanstalk's vines, extended the mooring anchors, and wrote a script to activate the dionizers when needed.

"I must be crazy. What am I doing?" The decision to go had been a hasty one.

One gin-fueled weekend on Ibiza, drunk and stoned on hashish, she had followed a DJ friend out to a Emirati's yacht. Passed out in a stateroom, she hadn't noticed the turbine roar. Enroute to Sardinia, her friends back on the island, Zara found herself on a vessel alone with young Arab men who spoke little French. Cordial and fun-loving, they saw to her safety, even paying for her ticket back home. She had been lucky then, but she'd always been lucky when it came to headlong whimsy.

With wings folded and antennae coiled, Xu plunged onward. Zara marveled at Xanadu's conjoined atmosphere. Highways of gas wove around the Beanstalk in intricate interleaves. Xu exploited the column's ferric perturbations like an atlas, every turn and dive perfectly planned. A delicate choreographed dance, Zara now understood how the Gaussians had wreaked havoc.

Sailing through the aerial seas of a far off planet, she momentarily forgot her plight. The pent-up doubt and fear faded. At peace, Zara imagined Xu as an angel sent from heaven.

He flexed his wings, the turbulence jostling them. The pull of the lower planetoid increased. Zara felt the rush. More and more, his wings fluttered and hummed. No longer in free-fall, the air condensed around them as her mask misted. Like the widening trunk of Yggdrasil, the Beanstalk's girth increased as they approached the Myr's

world. The floating jungle gave way to Xanduvian high alpine. Spindly trees sprouted from the Beanstalk's widening slopes. Tall and sleek, they resembled microscopic hairs of some Goliath beast. Teal blobs of moss clung to their spiky fronds. More sponge than leaves, the foliage dripped with condensation.

Her ears popped as the pressure increased. Below the horizon expanded. The Beanstalk gave way to the planet's geoid. Xu's dragonfly wings pounded with a steady beat. He pulled Zara close, his arms wrapping tight under her breasts. Pushed against his underbelly, she felt the patter of his ventrals and bellow of his air sacs, his body heat warming her from the damp wind.

'My sisters, the Proelia,' Xu said, pointing below.

The ground rose up. Rivers of movement fanned out over the planet-scape. Zara fidgeted with her mask to catch a better glimpse. Like a Kalahari migration, millions of Myr plowed through a labyrinth of badlands. Tributaries fed an all-consuming river of alien life.

Wings stretched. Xu slowed his glide. Stalactites of nickel-iron spiraled skyward to shape a skyline. Black rock formed shiny spires cordoned by crags, cirques, and rifts. Nestled in between were blooms of tumescent foliage. Their interwoven branches reminded Zara of a corpuscular network held aloft by an unseen liquid. Alongside the marching columns, sickly and scorched wastes butted against vibrant viridian. Dipping lower, Zara caught a closer glimpse of Xu's female counterparts.

The Proelia drones —the Myr females— disparate in size and appearance, surprised Zara. Wingless,

the females clambered along on a set of six robust legs. Where Xu's body had adapted perfectly for flight, the females bulged with stout arms and flattened bodies for porting and assault. Among the throng, titans —three to four times the size—roamed. Their bodies were massive, able to carry a bizarre array of cargo, including other drones and a macabre load Zara chose to momentarily ignore.

She begged Xu to land.

'But the queen awaits,' Xu protested.

"I know. Just for a moment."

Xu floated down to a rocky overlook. He relaxed his grip and gently set her down on the cleft. She quickly removed her mask and adjusted it. Her nose and throat stung from the reek of iron and ammonia. Coughing, she cinched up the straps, wiped away the smudges, and quickly put the mask back on. A tap of the filters offered relief. Xanadu's atmosphere, while breathable, brimmed with nastiness.

Zara took in the world below. A 'Y' shaped canyon created a pinch-point for the Proelia marching column. Forming a two-lane highway, the outbound/inbound shuffled past in an orderly madness. Now, in vivid detail, Zara saw what she had refused to see before.

"What are they carrying?"

'Nourishment,' Xu replied.

The dismembered zoology of an entire planet drifted by on the backs of Xu's female cousins: flopping limbs, gutted torsos, bloated entrails, all held together by excreted skeins to make the slop easier to carry. Their butchery was indiscriminate. The slaughtered creatures comprised a cornucopia of Xanduvian fauna. Black slicks of mucous stained the ground. Blood coated

the broken terrain like asphalt. Pushing on, the front lines extended over the horizon. Equipped with razor-sharp mandibles and claws, the females scoured their tiny world for digestible biomass, an assembly line of carnage. Zara crept back from the ledge.

"Would your sisters consider me nourishment?" Zara asked.

'You are fearful," Xu said, his telepathy reading more than just words. 'Do not be. You are with me.'

"And if I wasn't?"

'You would not be here.'

Xu dismissed the hypothetical. Like Dante's Virgil, he was her guide in this peculiar underworld, a winged angel in the alien abyss.

"Can they communicate, like you?"

'Yes. Listen."

Above the clacking feet, she opened her mind and let in the cacophony. Voices, thousands of them, whispered to each other in a harmonized cant. All business, the drones conversed with an immediacy that bordered on panic.

"They're scared."

'Fearful for their queen.'

"I don't understand. Your race is so powerful." Zara said.

'She is about to move the hive, her reasons unknown. The Proelia work harder to accommodate, afraid the new brood will wither and die.' Xu's voice faded. The whispers below built to a nervous roar.

"What's happening?"

'They've found more nourishment,' Xu said.

With one of his upper arms, he pointed to the horizon. Another front had opened. Like the tide,

a flood of aliens shifted course through a narrow chasm. In minutes, the carnage flowed in reverse as the sisters returned with heaps of fresh larder.

Their prey looked like the Beanstalk's beetles, but sturdier and more adapted to gravity. A few still writhed in the maws of their killers, their half-sheared wings buzzing. Zara felt pity.

'We need to move on. The queen senses I've returned. I must report to her.'

"Let's go," Zara said, anxious to leave.

They soared through Xanadu's haze, the clouds accented with mustard-yellow. Like a high-altitude cruise over the lunar surface, Zara took in the smallness of the Myr's planet. Zara guessed the planet was roughly two-thirds the size of the Moon, but its dense core pulled with a heavier weight. In the distance, a terraced mountain rose above the surface, spiked with spires of dripping nickel-iron,.

'The hive.'

Capillaries of marching drones merged into a main artery before disappearing inside. A roof of gnarled vine, thick and woody, hid the bustle. Xu dove into the briar. Burrows and cells —built up from a hard fibrous plaque— formed a honeycomb of excretion. Builders —a special class of sub-species— worked the edges of structures like masons. Clinging to the canopy, undulating worms crept about, herded by Xu's gangly long-limbed cousins.

"Livestock?"

'They feed the repletes.'

Xu followed the worm trail down to a dome of organic geodesic. Inside, sepia bubbles clung to the walls. Hedgerows of polished ivory or calcium

separated the blistered cordons, providing small highways for the shepherds and worms to move about. Fluttering closer, Zara noticed the bubbles were the bloated abdomens of Myr repletes, immobile and engorged. The worms secreted a milky substance from their teats. Using their mouthparts, the gluttonous Myr siphoned the liquid away like mother's milk.

'The repletes store honey for the brood, to feed the larva later.'

"Like wet-nurses," Zara remarked.

'Without the repletes, the young could not grow.'

"And where are the young?"

'It is just after queening. This is the long season —the interim. The new ones are not yet hatchlings, still in the mulch.'

They flew on through more chambers. The air was thick and humid. She felt sweat pool underneath her suit. Her skin itched where Xu gripped her. Pale honeycomb stretched out below, incubators on an industrial scale. The Proelia, like gardeners, tended to the writhing larva inside their cells.

They entered a natural cave, a Xanduvian lava tube perhaps. Moss coated the walls. Water beaded and dripped from its bristle. Underneath, more Proelia churned the mulch. The Myr's need for calories was furious.

Zara struggled to see in the faint light. Underneath the Myrs' eyes, a bioluminescence glowed like headlights, their eyes dappled the black. Deeper and deeper, they flew on until the narrow passageway opened up.

'We are in the antechamber, Regina's court.'

"The queen?"

'Yes.'

Expecting a mimic of Earth's royalty, Zara saw nothing resembling regalia or pomp. Instead of a gallery of courtesans and lieges, the cavern was a bone-yard nearly devoid of life, except a few wandering Proelia.

"Who guards your Regina?"

'She has no enemies,' Xu said.

"But the Proelia, you said they're afraid for their queen?"

'She is afraid, yes, but it is not the Myrs' place to know. The Regina is complex. We are merely her servitors.'

Safely on the floor, Xu let Zara go. Weightless for so long, she stumbled. A sickly sweet pushed through the mask. Decay was everywhere. Too decomposed, the detritus was beyond recognition. Heaps of exoskeleton surrounded them. Bits and fragments crunched underneath her boots like eggshell.

"What is all this?" Zara gestured at the dregs.

'Molting shed from the Reginas as they mature in to breeding queens,' Xu explained.

Atop a plinth in the center of the subterranean sat the Myr queen. Not quite the size of a Proelia titan, the Regina was a giant in her own right. Ornamental wings clung to her back, tiny, vestigial, and useless. Rickety limbs propped her up, a white pox polluting a once smooth shell. She looked more Cephon —more male— than the Proelia females, but less sturdy, and less ambulatory. Bred out, the Regina lacked an egg sack, her abdomen just a shriveled balloon.

'Come, she waits.'

Hesitant, Zara hid behind Xu as they approached. Near the throne, a host of dead surrounded the

Regina; not just molting, but full carcasses cast about like a mass grave.

"They're all dead."

'They were the queens that came before.'

"And you just leave them here, to rot?"

'Yes.'

The Myr lacked a taboo for the deceased. Only the most primitive human tribes left their dead to commingle with the living. On Xanadu, maybe the aliens didn't struggle with disease. Maybe leaving the dead as an ornament —instead of in an urn or tombstone— was more apropos, an immediate reminder.

'The queening is over. All her brood are in gestation,' Xu explained. 'She now only has to give birth to herself.'

"What does that mean...?" Zara asked, perplexed, "to give birth to herself?"

'Inside her, a seed awaits. As she dies, her memories transfer to the new body and the cycle will repeat,' Xu explained.

"She's clones herself?"

Xu's antennae wavered about; a gesture Zara interpreted as a shrug.

The Regina's eye-lights pulsed green. Her breathing was raspy. Zara sensed Xu and the Regina were communicating, but the words were untranslatable, like the Proelia's soldier cant. Auditing the telepathy, Zara felt emotion mixed with terror. After a minute, Xu stopped to translate.

'I have failed her.' Xu slung his head.

"How?"

'The Cephon did not achieve sacrifice to the Masters. It is my responsibility to guide them.'

Now the Regina thinks you have come as an emissary of our doom.'

"Did you tell her I'm not a Master, that I'm lost, that I need help?" Zara paused. "Did you tell her the truth?"

'Yes. She is not convinced.'

Zara turned to the Regina and approached the plinth, climbing over the litter and detritus. "Please. My machine confused him," she explained, "It threw them off course. It's my fault. I'm to blame, not him."

The queen cringed. Zara bowed then kneeled. After a pause, the Regina spoke to Zara in a worried chorus, intoning her telepathy with a poetic rhythm. Unlike Xu, the matriarch used a rainbow of complex emotion to communicate. Zara struggled at first, but soon the words took shape.

'They sent you, didn't they?' asked the Regina.

"The Masters? -No," Zara confessed. "I don't know anything more about these Masters than what Xu has told me."

'But you are not like us. You are more like them. Your flesh, it hangs from you. Why don't you moult?'

Zara pulled at the folds of her suit. To the Myr, clothes were absurd, their bodies like bone armor, their soft undersides naturally protected. Zara, a watery blob, required what nature could not provide, a second skin. Zara undid her zippers and peeled away the suit. The queen's faded eyes brightened. Naked except for her panties, Zara removed her mask. The sting of the air forced a cough. Struggling to breathe, her eyes watered. She performed a pirouette and let the Regina inspect her. Shaking out her hair, Zara did her best to hide her spinal jack.

"All natural, like you," Zara choked.

'You are like a pupau, soft...'

Zara couldn't take it anymore and quickly put the mask back on. Once strapped, she breathed deeply. The queen tottered towards her on weak legs. A long useless arm extended witch-like.

'You have a mark,' the Regina said, gesturing for Zara to turn back around. 'What is it?'

The queen touched her. The tingle of her setae caused Zara to shiver. It was the Chronophage tattoo, the Corpus Clock, the circular symbol splashed across her shoulder. All these months, she'd nearly forgotten it. The sinister profile of grasshopper mimicked the features of the Myr, albeit an unflattering caricature. Zara gave little thought to the resemblance until now. Embarrassed, she tried to explain herself.

"It's a clock on my home world, a time piece."

'You use Cephon drones to keep time?'

"Not exactly. It's a symbol, a metaphor for time's relative nature. It consumes time randomly. It eats the past and makes way for the new," Zara stammered, struggling for words. "Always forward, never back."

The room grew quiet. There was a mental hush from both Xu and the queen then a flurry of telepathy. They again spoke to each other in their un-intelligible cant. Zara waited, nervous she had caused offense.

"They didn't send me. I don't know who they are, but I need to find them. I need them to help me. You've got to believe me," Zara pleaded with the queen.

'You can't convince her,' Xu answered for the frail Regina. 'You've shown the sign. Proof.'

"What...?" Zara yammered, confused. "What sign?"

'The Chronophage.'

She almost laughed. "It's just a coincidence."

'The Myr do not believe in coincidence.'

[CP] CHAPTER EIGHT

Zara leaned her head against the cabin window and felt the vibration. Closing her eyes, she let the drone lull her. It was supposed to be a routine shuttle flight, but thirty minutes on, she was getting anxious. After earning her wings, she became impatient with other pilots. Every delay screamed incompetence. Aggravated and annoyed, she clenched her fists and waited.

Through the window, she saw the fuel gimbals retract and lower into the tarmac. Another ten minutes. With a sigh, she looked about the cabin; active-duty only, no wayfarers or civvy contractors, the typical Lagrange crowd. A few Quebois engineers sat near the front with a stretch of empty seats in between, talking quietly among themselves.

Despite it being on-the-way, Flights down the Well didn't connect through Lagrange. Instead, Earth-bound passengers transferred to low orbit for reentry. The Lagrange station was a black hole, a dead-end. The facility was Legion's spaceborne answer to the United State's fabled Groom Lake. You were only allowed on the in-bound shuttle if you had proper clearance.

"Come on!" she quietly lamented. "What the hell's taking so long?"

For a third time, Zara heard the thrusters wind up then wind down. Another false start. She was keeping count. Nothing but static on intercom, the crew was obviously too busy to relay any detail. Neophytes.

"How long does it take to plug in a fucking umbilical?" Zara moaned

With the advent of the umbilical interface, human spaceflight found new relevance. Modern aeronautics –governed by a complicated feedback system– had become the domain of machines and A.I. pilots. Responding to remote cuing, automata dominated the high-atmosphere's battlefields. But losses were high.

Small glitches –either from jamming or communication error– corrupted the drone's autonomy. Hundreds were lost due to linkage faults. Remote control no longer worked. In frustration, scientists went back to the biological drawing board. With no way to synthetically culture neural networks –let alone teach them– engineers discovered a simpler, more elegant answer. Human pilots were re-introduced into the cockpit. A new era of the fighter ace was born. In the following years –much to the engineers' surprise– 'organic avionics' exceeded their silicon counterpart. To go back would be retrograde.

The technology started as a medical breakthrough. Wired through a spinal implant, the 'umbilical' shunted a paraplegic's nervous system, giving them back control of their rewired body. Adapted for military use, the technology recreated a pilot's sensorium inside a spacecraft. Like an appendage, a twitch pivoted a thruster, a clench fired a rocket, all slaved the ship's gyroscopic 'inner ear.' No longer hassled by a screaming array of warning indicators, the pilot managed damage as pain, malfunction prioritized with a visceral immediacy.

Zara remembered her first flight, a simple training simulation. The technicians had attenuated the umbilical in order to not overload her cerebellum. With a click, a new body materialized in the electrical ether. Complicated sensation transcended clumsy limbs and fingers. In 'free mode', the instructors let her mind adjust to umbilical flight. Her reflexes soon adapted.

The Challenger was an hypersonic trainer with inertial dampeners, an amazing vehicle. Zara loved the plane. So light and fast, she felt like Icarus reborn. Literally 'one' with the vehicle, the freedom felt orgasmic. After a flight, a blah dullness returned with her corporeal-self. Hands like rubber, fingers like sausages, a kind of withdrawal came after she had unplugged. Obsessed, Zara counted the minutes until her next flight.

She rose through Legion's pilot ranks, tackling each new vehicle with relentless discipline. In a two short years, she'd mastered inter-orbital docking, entry and descent, tactical evasion, and experimental propulsion. Like an addict, she craved the umbilical. To get her fix, she spent her off-hours wired to the Va-gas robots in the Le Boudin's battle lounge. Crude homemade kluges, what they lacked in fidelity, they made up for in sloppy violence.

After an initial down select, she volunteered for Legion's test-pilot program. Like a rocket-strapped ballerina encased in metal, Zara had found her calling. She aced the competition. Impressed, her commander nominated her for Titan, a clandestine flight program 'without precedent.' Zara was all in.

The mission was a sacrifice, nearly two years of relativistic flight, ten years Earth-time. Life as

she knew it would end. Committing to the Pilot implant added another risky dimension. Getting fitted for an umbilical and a spinal jack was routine rookie stuff. But having her consciousness permanently altered? Risky.

With a month to launch, Zara needed simulator time. Malik lacked a sense of urgency, however. A victim of her own success, it appeared nobody thought she needed the extra training. Zara's gut told her otherwise.

"Come on, you fuck-ups. Get this bird out of the Lake."

The launch pylon shuddered. Not a second too soon. With a groan, the shuttle lifted off. Rockets whirring, the Lake's crater-scape receded. Somewhere to the south in The Sea of Serenity's dim wilderness, sat the remnants of the United States' Apollo 17. She'd never visited the monument but had always wanted to. Time never allowed it.

Zara reclined in her gravity chair and dimmed the overheads. Soon, she was asleep. Zero-G slumber was unbeaten. Even in the Moon's low gravity, she tossed and turned. But weightless sleep? A rare luxury. Down the Well –back on Earth – sleep was torture, an experiment in exhaustion. Insomnia proved as good an excuse as any to never return.

An hour out, she awoke to the intercom announcing entry into L1 Halo orbit. Retro-thrusters shook the cabin. The overhead lights flickered. Soon, the Lagrange's sprawling complex slid over the starry black. The station was a tangle of struts, geodesics, and dry-docks. A central toroid provided weak gravity for office-space and living quarters. Adjacent to the central

hub was the 'Titan Spur', an annex of program dedicated engineering bays and zero-G hangars.

Once docked, Zara checked in to the visitor lobby. The guards scanned her credentials then issued her a badge and temporary access code. After a series of airlocks, she was inside. The mix of coolant, epoxy, and stale funk formed an effluvium distinct to Lagrange. The odors triggered old memories, some good, some not so good.

She floated past fellow pilots and researchers. Like tribal tattoos, they wore their program patches proudly. The cryptic symbols hinted at an almost Masonic cryptology. Purposely vague, they lacked meaning to all but those in the 'know', offering a kind of camaraderie where there had been none before. Titan's patch bore an abstract Chronos, the Greek god of time, a three-headed serpentine emblazoned on a star-field of the Centaurus Constellation. Too cluttered, Zara thought it a mess.

She found her way to the Titan Spur. After a retinal scan, she passed a series of tempest bulkheads before entering the central interchange. At the nexus, five airlocks converged. A lone guard floated about, a bandolier of wrenches and power-tools jangling at his waist. He was repairing an alarm panel when he noticed her.

"That's the wrong way."

"How do you know where I was going?" she asked, backing away from the large hatchway to her right.

"I don't, but that hangar's at a higher caveat. You're not cleared."

"But I'm Titan Tier 3."

The guard shook his head. "Not good enough. That's a whole different ball-game."

Unacknowledged. Black on black...." He pointed a screwdriver at the hatchway. "Only Malik and a few others are briefed."

It was another hangar judging by the nearby payload totes. She looked at the security markings. Instead of the typical quirky codename, a meaningless alphanumeric marked the door. Next to the cipher, someone had installed a time lock, the breech swathed in red seal tape.

"Not very busy, is it?"

"Not very, no." The guard looked at her suspiciously. "Minerva, Right?"

"Yes."

"Where do you need to go, Minerva?"

"The simulator labs. Hangar Two."

"Well, this is Hangar One." The guard nodded and pointed his screw-gun in the opposite direction. "The Victoria hangar, just past the second egress..." the guard paused, face screwed up, "—Haven't you been here before?"

"Yeah, but..." Zara didn't have time to explain. "Thanks."

"Sure," he said, returning to the frayed wiring harness.

Floating on, she saw Malik and his chief engineers clustered around a rack of test equipment. Across from them was the Victoria's hangar door. Light spilled in through the open hatch. Zara peered into the massive aerodrome.

Gantry's and scaffold surrounded the spacecraft, the vehicle's sleekness seductively hidden. Like honeybees, mechanics hovered around the Titan drives' manifolds. Every time she saw the ship, her heart pitapatted. Muscle and brawn married to a feminine guile, the Victoria was the 'Winged Victory' of aerospace design. All engine, its twin

drives protruded out from its fuselage, the gaping Gaussian intakes a caricature of bygone air-breathing turbofans.

Like a tractor beam, its electromagnetic coils funneled wayward hydrogen into a reactor core. At relativistic speeds, the charged swirl produced pair-production inside the manifold. Using Penning Traps, anti-matter annihilated with deuterium. At relativistic speed, the drives could generate micrograms of anti-matter. The faster it went, the more thrust. Legion dubbed it the interstellar 'hyper-scam.'

"I expect everything's been debugged and ready for launch," Zara joked.

Malik spun around as the engineers switched the off their display screens. She had interrupted something.

"We weren't expecting you," Malik halfheartedly apologized.

"The drift-dive simulation... you scheduled me, remember?"

"I'm sorry. Things have been a hectic. I must have forgotten—"

Incredulous, Zara cocked her head and nodded at the Victoria. "And who do you think is going to fly your priceless bird, Malik?"

No one said anything. An engineer turned away, lips pursed, eyes downcast.

"You're going to bounce me for an alternate, aren't you? Some hotshot waiting in the wings —Is it Preacher? —Yogi? —Vegas? —Reaper? —Who?"

"You worry too much," Malik said, his baritone gravely. "I assure you, you will be the first to fly the Victoria."

Zara crossed her arms, satisfied for now. "Fine —look, I need to get to the simulator."

"Bardu will set you up. I'll radio him."

"Excellent," Zara replied.

Five minutes later, Bardu arrived, his recent humiliation still fresh. Unshaven with bloodshot eyes, he skirted the ragged edge of regulation. He looked haunted, exhausted and worse... guilty. Zara grew worried her co-conspirator might expose their little plan. After bidding adieu to Malik, Bardu led her to the simulation bay.

"Relax."

"I should turn you in to LISP. This is bullshit," he whispered, checking the corridor for eavesdroppers.

"You won't," Zara whispered back.

"Why not?"

"Too much pride."

Bardu said nothing.

They passed through a service bay and entered a corridor filled with glycol coolers. One of Legion's state-of-the-art virtual flight centers, the Victoria simulator required vast computational assets. Recreated through the pilot's umbilical, every bump and jostle had to be calculated real-time. Bardu hit the entry code and waited for access.

"Okay," he started. "I've reset the drift-dive trigger. The mnemonic will appear a few seconds beforehand. You'll be groggy, but watch for it. The goggles should display the image on cue. The picture will be encoded with an audible word. You'll only have one shot. If it doesn't work, no mulligans. I'm done after this. Fair?" Bardu said, his face beaded with nervous sweat.

"Fair enough," Zara replied

The door dilated. Inside, a group of technicians sat in gravity chairs, heads buried in screens

filled with source code. A few nodded at Zara, but most were too engrossed to pay any mind. The test lead Arturo, a wiry man with a head of red friz and horn-rimmed glasses, greeted them.

"Are you ready for me?" Zara asked.

"Minerva," Arturo said nervously. "We're uploading the scenario. We..." he stammered, "—We haven't had a lot of time to work out the bugs, so you'll have to bear with." Arturo's lack of urgency mirrored Malik's apathy.

"I don't mean to be short, Arturo," Zara started, anger in her voice, "but I can't help but get the impression I'm being humored. I catch the first shuttle up from the Lake, in desperate need of stick time, and it's nothing but amateur hour."

Bardu, backed away.

"Minerva. —Can I be blunt?"

"As long as you're honest," she snapped.

"We've had to accelerate the schedule. My team's been working non-stop to compile the scenarios for drift-dive. The sergeant, here..." Arturo pointed at the shifty Bardu, "has helped us, but we're lacking manpower. This whole drift-dive interface is very complicated. We're doing our best."

"I launch in a few weeks, Arturo."

"We're trying to accommodate."

After a pause, Zara sighed. "Alright, let's see what you've got."

The flight suit was nothing special, standard issue with a built-in dosimeter. The Victoria's umbilical was custom however, a high-speed wireless model. Arturo activated the device and calibrated the spinal pins. With its LEDs glowing blue, he handed it over.

Zara popped it into her spinal jack. A set of arms extended from its chassis and gripped her

occipital. Comfortable enough, it gave her freedom to pilot the Victoria from anywhere inside the cabin.

"Ready?" Arturo gestured to the trainer cockpit.

Zara nodded as Bardu helped her inside.

"Remember, right before the trigger. The image will be a brief flash and then the mnemonic," Bardu whispered.

"Got it."

"I want proof," he said, strapping her in to the simulator's gravity chair.

"Proof?"

"Proof you've deleted the pictures. After this, you and me are going to find a terminal, and I'm going to watch you go through your account," Bardu hissed.

"If I get what I want..."

Bardu cued up Zara's goggles, and then left the simulator cabin. Arturo updated her on the simulation dossier through a cranial microphone: a simple relativistic flight in drift-dive. The session was not supposed to last more than ten hours. The cabin mock-up was a close recreation of the Victoria right down to the blue-shifted star fields outside. The only thing missing was the constant one-G push of acceleration.

"Minerva, initiation sequence in three... two... one."

Zara's umbilical awoke. Nerves alight; she expanded into the spacecraft's husk. She wiggled and tweaked its servos, hydraulics, and thrusters. Like a comfortable leather jacket, the spacecraft's controls were uncanny and familiar.

"How's it feel?" Arturo asked.

"It's too easy, too arcade-like," Zara replied.

"It's the real deal," Arturo touted. "This is our must current compile, like nothing you tried before. We bench tested it. You've adapted well, it appears."

"Osmosis?" Zara joked.

"Not exactly. For whatever reason, your piloting abilities have vastly improved since Pilot implantation."

"How that?" Zara asked. She'd been in the simulator many times before, mainly in awake-mode, with a few short turns at drift-dive. The vehicle was always a handful, but now... it was like she was born to it.

Arturo shrugged. "Not sure."

"Whatever. On with it."

"Switching over to relativist flight. Ready?"

Zara gave a thumbs up.

Arturo paused then shouted. "Now!"

Like a dunk in a cold lake, Zara gasped. Hundreds of warnings blared like a migraine. Every second she fumbled with the controls, the more erratic things became. Like pulling out of a spin, she fought the chaos.

"How's it feel?" Arturo said, oblivious to Zara's struggle.

"Slowly making progress," she grunted.

"Remember, like we've mentioned before, this is all artificial. There would be a long period of acceleration beforehand. You wouldn't just be dumped into near light speed, unless your umbilical fails, and then..."

—And then she would be nothing more than dust. Mismanagement of anti-matter flux could detonate the engines like a thousand nuclear bombs; the light so bright, the explosion would be visible

from Earth. Continually created and destroyed, mass was dangerous alchemy.

"Monitors show you're beginning to normalize."

Finding her sea legs, Zara was in control. The warnings receded into intermittent hiccups. Reflex returned. She exhaled and eased into the gravity chair's cushioned comfort, riding the cosmic surf like a Hindu guru. A yoga calm descended.

"Stable now. Ready for drift-dive."

Interstellar hydrogen was fickle. The wayward fuel filled the galactic emptiness with varying density. As a result, turbulence built up inside the Gaussian intakes. Like a bird fighting a headwind, every jostle required an instantaneous physiological response.

Typical tactical missions lasted less than a standard thirty hour day. Endurance had never posed a problem for Legion pilots. The Titan mission, however, was scheduled to last years, not hours. With Zara's brain slaved to the controls, she would have to sustain lucidity. To accomplish such a feat, she would cycle through drift-dives in lieu of sleep. Every twenty hours of 'wakefulness' would precede a ten-hour 'drift-dive.' Akin to sleepwalking, the fugue lacked cognitive fidelity. Too much exposure posed a risk. Balance had to be maintained.

"Alright, Minerva. Ready."

Ready for the cue, Zara strapped on the bulky goggles and audio-jacks. Its metronome thump mesmerized her. Like an African sunset, deep purple faded to tangerine sky. Eyes itchy, she struggled against the hypnosis, waiting for Bardu's per-programmed glitch.

"Pompidou."

Following the codeword, an image appeared, a floating white flowerpot against a star field framed by tile. Lasting seconds, Zara repeated the word until the transition completed. A minute later and she was in drift-dive.

#

"How did I do?" Zara asked, looking over Arturo's shoulder at the flight brief.

"Well..." he said wryly. "Impeccable. You're a natural. Titan logs showed no problem, adequate flux maintained throughout. You even had time for a routine sensor check in the starboard's Penning Traps."

"Any lag?"

"Nope."

Zara was skeptical. She asked Arturo for the logs. Annoyed, he muttered something about having to process the flight recorder for playback. By his sighs, it was a lengthy and tedious process.

"How long then?" Zara pushed.

"I don't know, Minerva," he moaned. "A day or two?"

"Can the data be sent down to the Lake via program channels? I'd like to review it once you're done."

"Yeah... I suppose," Arturo groaned, running both hands through his red mop. "Even the telemetry data?"

"Everything," Zara demanded.

A fly in their ointment, she could only wonder at Titan's shift in priorities. His sourness offered little comfort. Like a jealous lover, she was about to ask Arturo if there was another pilot in training, but it would be a waste of time. If he knew, he wouldn't be at liberty to divulge.

"Your shuttle's leaving in an hour," Bardu interjected, eyes nervously glancing at the control room clock.

"Right," Zara said.

Floating back through the corridor, Zara noticed Malik and the engineering crew were gone, the doors sealed.

"It's late," Bardu offered. "Mechanics, engineering, they've all gone home for the day."

Down the corridor, she heard muffled conversation. The hatch leading into the nexus sat ajar. Zara approached and peered through the crack. Blue strobes filled the chamber. The guard loitered about keeping an eye on the egresses. Hangar One —sealed when she'd arrived— was now open. The guard had lied to her. He was briefed. But why the deception?

"We're not accessed," Bardu hissed. "Get back."

Zara shushed him then crept up to catch a glimpse. Silhouetted by klieg lamps, she saw Malik and a few others hovering at the hangar's threshold. In the shadows, half-hidden by bulkheads, she saw it.

"It's another Victoria," she gasped.

Only the forward fuselage and cabin were visible, its gaping Gaussians hidden. Unlike the pristine Victoria in Hangar Two, soot and yellow oxides streaked its composite hull. Divots pocked its duck-billed prow and sensor gimbals. Every inch of exposed metal shined like sandblasted chrome.

"It's beat to shit," Zara whispered. "It's like someone flew it light speed through the Ort Cloud. Is it a prototype, or something?"

Back in the shadows, Bardu said nothing. Zara sifted through the muddled conversation. Talk of a

'containment field' and features of the specialized hangar –all technical, she gleaned little.

"They built two of them?" Zara looked over her shoulder at Bardu. "What do you know about this?"

He only shrugged.

"Are you briefed to Hangar One?"

"No," Bardu whispered.

Zara flashed him a suspicious stare.

With a beep, the doors closed in a hydraulic rumble, sealing in Malik and company. The guard switched off the strobes and went back to his station. Zara and Bardu waited then squeezed through the egress. Startled, the guard floundered about.

"All clear?" Zara sked.

"Of course," the guard replied, playing dumb.

"I thought I heard the hangar door close, so..."

"Maintenance," he smirked.

"I thought you said you weren't briefed?" Zara inquired.

"I'm not."

Zara knew he was lying but dropped it; it wasn't worth the effort. Whatever conspiracy Titan had hatched, he was a part of it, and most probably Bardu.

"There's an unclassified terminal in the Toroid's visitor center," Bardu mentioned as they stepped into a transit pod.

"So," Zara said, hitting the button.

"I did what you asked. I spoofed the drift-dive mnemonic and got you what you needed. Now, I want proof you erased those photos," Bardu huffed, arms crossed.

Zara said nothing, the click-click of track casters offering the only sound. Passing through

the Titan Spur, stars filled the pod windows. Construction stanchions and tethers broke the blackness. A few more minutes and they would arrive at the central hub.

"So, are you going to let me off the hook?" Bardu whined.

Zara grabbed a rung near the pod's door and slapped the emergency stop button. An automated female voice urged the them to pick up the handset and report their emergency. Zara disobeyed. Hand firmly around the escape latch, she bit her lower lip.

"What are you doing?" Bardu roared.

Outside the pod, loomed a half-assembled geodesic and an empty construction module. No one had yet to mate the new structures with a pod-capable airlock. Zara gripped the lever. The female voice repeated itself.

"Who?"

"Who -what?" Bardu stammered.

"Who is it?"

"I don't how what you're talking about."

"Who's the other pilot, Bardu? The one that's flying the other Victoria."

"Get away from the latch," he said.

"There's another Victoria -another ship- and you saw it. I saw it. Malik thinks my mission is going to fail, doesn't he? They've an insurance policy. Who is it?" Zara demanded, her hand still gripping the latch.

"You really are a crazy bitch, aren't you?" Bardu shook his head. "Listen. Fuck it. Send out your little S&M postcards of me and that whore. I don't care. This isn't worth it."

"You really don't want me to do that," Zara warned.

"At this point..." Bardu shook his head with an incredulous grin. "The oil-drenched swamps of the Niger delta would be a welcome relief from you. Knee-deep in the shit, bullets flying past my head, at least I'd know where I stand."

Zara hit the pressure release valve. A slow leak hissed as air vented from the pod. Ears crackling, Zara wiggled her jaw to relieve the pressure.

"Tell me the pilot's name. I'm not messing around here, Bardu. I want to know who it is."

"I don't know!" Bardu yelled, lips trembling. "Come on. You'll kill us."

Bardu, looked more a child than a knuckle-dragging grunt. He was too simple to lie. He didn't know the answer. He'd reached his threshold for skullduggery. He would have told her anything. Malik knew better than to brief a hangar ape like Bardu on Titan's true machinations. Zara turned off the valve release. The pod's regulators sputtered to life, refilling the cramped space with air.

"You done?" Bardu exclaimed, breathing heavy. "Christ's sake."

Zara nodded.

"You've really cracked, haven't you?"

She smirked. "Can I ask you a question?"

He nodded. "If it'll get me out of this fucking pod any sooner..."

"What are the rumors?"

"Rumors? About you?"

"About me —about Titan —about Malik —everything."

Bardu divulged what he knew. As he described it, there had been a sea change in Titan protocol after Zara's surgical recovery. According to Lagrange's neurologists, her prognosis wasn't

stable, the Pilot implant marginal. Contingency planning was in works, but the specifics hadn't been released. Malik had planned 'stress testing' for Zara, drift-dive trials intended to test her post-implant constitution and resilience. Without adequate quality assurance, Titan's chief engineers were wary.

"And the other Victoria?"

Bardu didn't know. Zara found the idea improbable. Victoria was the most expensive spacecraft ever constructed. Legion finance couldn't keep such a procurement hush-hush. After a stiff Jardin Martini at Le Boudin, the Lake's bean counters were known to run their mouths. So much so, LISP staked out the bar just to bust the fools.

Rhutan, Bardu's cohort, mentioned seeing one of 5th Wing's aces hanging around Malik. Bardu described the pilot as a well-built inverted triangle of a man with square jaw and gray-blond buzz cut. Most Avenger jocks were interchangeable. The anecdote offered little proof of anything. She could only speculate on the second pilot.

"I never meant to kill Specialist Renard, Bardu. I didn't know what I was doing."

"We could have drowned you," Bardu admitted.

"Then why didn't you?"

Bardu shrugged. "No point."

Zara released the emergency stop and the transit pod accelerated.

"About the pictures..." Bardu started, his voice conciliatory.

"—Don't worry about it. I never uploaded them."

[CP] CHAPTER NINE

The scanner was a beast. Its magnetic maw filled the laboratory. She hopped off the slide table and put her clothes back on. Embarrassed, Pierre tried not to look.

Saturated with dust, clothes distorted fields and cluttered data. To improve accuracy, the scans required the subject to be naked and deionized. Pierre had offered to set up the blinds, but Zara shrugged it off. Drawn to her bruises and welts, she noticed him having a look.

"I didn't mean to..." Pierre started, "I just didn't realize they were that bad."

Under the lab's fluorescent lights, Zara's pale skin' contrasted with her dapple of contusions and abrasions. She walked over and sat next to Pierre. They both stared at the scanner's console. Walls of image data scrolled across the screen, the processing almost finished.

"They don't hurt anymore."

Pierre shook his head. "I've worked HIL ten years now —mostly with Legion— but I've never seen legionnaires do that kind of damage to one another."

"I got him back," Zara winked.

"Do I really want to know?" Pierre said, turning back to the screen.

"Not unless you're a fan of extortion, bondage, and a bit of pornography." She couldn't help herself; Pierre was too easy. Quick to crack a smile, he didn't seem to mind.

"What was his name?"

"Bardu. Not a bad guy, just a hangar ape in spook's clothing."

"But he tried to kill you..."

"—Under orders from Malik."

"You're awfully forgiving."

"Thick skinned, more like it."

Pierre shook his head, not understanding Zara's odd Stockholm syndrome. Like a big brother, she sensed his urge to protect her. In desperate need of an advocate, Pierre was the only person she trusted.

"Did you get what you needed?"

"Out of Bardu? Yeah."

Zara tapped one of the terminals and brought up a stylus. Her poorly rendered drawing of the flowerpot appeared. She would need a better image to coax the drift-dive out; art wasn't her thing. Pierre studied the drawing, forefinger curled under his chin.

"It's an optical illusion." He adjusted his glasses and leaned closer. "And the word...?"

"Pompidou," Zara repeated.

Pierre's eyes widened. "Cube Zero!"

"What?"

"I recognize it... strangely."

'Pompidou' was a reference to the now passé modern art museum in the center of Paris. Pierre described seeing it as a boy. A small tiled room with a window into the blackness of space, the sculpture was an immersion. Next to a vintage astronaut and the Earth's crescent, floated a giant white flowerpot. The tiled walls forced perspective and drew the eyes inward. It gave the illusion that the static pot was drifting towards the observer.

"Is it famous?" Zara asked.

"A classic piece of twentieth-century sculpture."

"Then there should be a picture, right?"

Pierre quickly scanned through the interlink's database, found the image, and expanded it on a panel monitor. "Cube Zero by Jean Pierre Raynaud – that's it."

"Will it work?"

"For the mnemonic? Not sure," Pierre sighed. "It's messy in there." He nodded at the slice-by-slice images of Zara's brain. "No offense."

"None taken."

The scanner was hybrid device, a combination of magnetic resonance and quantum hyper-detectors. Complex algorithms merged datasets to map the brain. In minutes, the scanners built a vast synaptic atlas. Flying through the neural maze, Pierre surfed the folds of Zara's gray matter. Electrical topography overlaid with blood density added relief.

"You see that?" Pierre pointed at the larger of the five screens.

A starburst appeared inside her skull. From what she remembered, the Pilot implant was small, its membrane more confined and isolated. The implant looked like it had metastasized. Pierre noted a bulge. An annex of the neural scarification, a tumor... Pierre wasn't sure.

"There's some leakage. See those nerve fibers extending from the salience?" Pierre pointed his pen at the screen. "It looks recent."

Zara gasped. "It's bleed, isn't it?"

Pierre shook his head. "I don't think so. This is artificial. This procedure –whatever it was– is secondary and performed after Pilot implantation. There's synaptic burns around the containment." He

again pointed at the screen. "A re-association of long-term memory, huge volumes of it, years worth—look at all that."

Zara went cold. Palms moist, a tension filled her chest. Tilting back in her office lounge, she pulled her knees to her chest.

"They've been monkeying with me surgically," Zara whimpered. "After the implant, that is..."

"Covering their tracks, perhaps, trying to contain old memories—but the size..." he said, incredulous.

"This would explain the estrangement, wouldn't it?" Zara offered. "The delineations, the agnosia, problems with familiarity, places, people..."

"It's possible." Pierre pivoted in his chair, elbow resting on knee. "Besides the estrangement, have you experienced any other memory lapses?"

"Lapses?"

"Life events, a whole year of university, or maybe recruit training, relationships—that sort of thing—events you take for granted but can't quite recall."

"Remembering things I might not remember? I don't..." Zara shook her head, eyes watering. "—I don't really know—what have they been hiding from me?"

"Don't worry." He forced a smile. "We'll figure this out."

Pierre got up, walked over to a locker next to a set of racks and removed a small metal box. He brought it back over and opened it. Inset in foam was a gold-plated adapter plug, sleek and low profile. A pin switch, coupled to a tiny purple LED, activated the device.

"This is the spinal shunt I told you about. The light," he pointed, "that's how you know it's

recording."

It was well packaged and streamlined; no epoxy smears or solder slop typical of a research prototype. He instructed her on its use, which overall, was straightforward. Turn it on. Plug it in. Record. The only problem was discretion. Her brunette curls would hide the gleaming device, but if Malik and his crew got carried away, the jig was up.

"And what happens after drift-dive?"

"I've rigged an original goggle prototype, an old Akira Katsuhiko model," Pierre replied, pointing to an unwieldy headset on a nearby cart. "We'll step through the drift-dive sequence and I'll interject the Cube Zero image with the verbal cue. The replay will manifest as a dream."

"A dream?" Zara was confused. "You mean, patchy, half-remembered, and nonsensical, like all my dreams?"

"Possibly —Are you back on the Theilexol?"

She nodded.

"A bit counter-intuitive, but the drug should help you remember. The pharmaceutical's acid agent works differently when externally stimulated. Anyway, when's your next drift-dive?"

Zara hopped on Legion's interlink and accessed her calendar. Malik had her scheduled for a session in two days back at the Pyramid.

"Nothing at Lagrange, no flight simulation training, more 'stress testing'," Zara explained. She remembered Arturo had mentioned a processor upgrade to the simulator kernel, undoubtedly more flack to keep her from prying.

"How long does drift-dive training last?"

"Depends. About as much as a typical sleep cycle, eight or ten hours."

"Shouldn't be a problem," Pierre said, calibrating the shunt with a hand-held unit. "The device can record up to twenty hours of limbic micro-voltage. The bandwidth is not great, but its adequate."

He handed her the shunt. She caressed its warm gold then slipped it into a cargo pocket. Slumped back, she watched Pierre scroll through her Parietal lobe, zooming in to the anomalous Euclidean blob north of the implant. Whatever it was, it looked pathological. She wasn't going psychotic; they'd done something to her.

"I need a drink," Zara sighed. "Is your place nearby? I don't feel like Le Boudin."

"I'm live out at Oashisu, the old HIL enclave. It's a bit of a drive, but..."

"—Any booze?"

"Not sure... maybe. I don't drink."

"Sounds like a personal problem."

#

Off the tramline and remote, the Oashisu crater was a minimalist marvel of Japanese lunar architecture. Built to house HIL's Osaka scientists, the corporation had expended big money to lure its brain trust off-world. Now, with fewer Legion contracts, the domicile was nearly empty. A waste of acclimatized space, the luxury felt excessive compared to The Arc's crowded warrens.

Pierre pulled his carryall into the undercroft's airlock. A whoosh of filtered air rinsed the vehicle of Moon dust. The parking level was near deserted as was the main lobby. Up two flights of stairs and down an empty hallway, Pierre led Zara to his apartment.

"This is ridiculous," Zara said, eyes wide as she walked through the front door. "No roommates,

this is all yours?"

"An executive manager left a year ago. I moved in temporarily, but no one's replaced him, so..."

The apartment was gigantic, an open floor plan separated by Tatami screens. Zara marveled at the imitation post-and-beam construction, complete with faux white-pine floors. With no timber for building, the architects exploited texture and dyes to bring out a natural wood feel from the lunar stone. Outside the apartment's wall of windows, someone had meticulously raked the crater floor into a Zen garden. Bits of black basalt —a rare Moon rock— formed an archipelago in the regolith. With no wind to stir the dust, one good raking was all it took.

"You actually live here?" Zara exclaimed.

Pierre nodded.

Zara tried to find clues about Pierre from his sparse belongings. Besides a Japanese affection for minimalism, nothing surfaced. The fake flower arrangements stood out, but they were no doubt pre-furnished. From under a low cabinet, he pulled out two pristine bottles of Japanese Whisky.

"Hibiki Twenty-one? Yamazaki Twenty-four?" Zara exclaimed.

"I'm not aware. Are they good?"

Zara was stupefied. "This is alcohol up from the Well; it's contraband."

"They were gifts from Akira back in the day. Morale boosters. We had won a few add-on contracts for an improved retinal tracker. Alcohol gives me a headache, so..."

Zara pulled off the top and filled a tumbler with the amber liquor. She took a whiff and closed her eyes, the woody aroma warming her senses. She pulled out an Export A and asked Pierre if she

could smoke. He mentioned Oashisu's over-powered filtration system, which Zara took as an okay. She lit the cigarette and idly gazed out at the Moonscape. Sipping her drink, Pierre went to fix a pot of tea.

"I can see the tip of the Pyramid."

Beyond the craggy crater rim, the red beacon pulse mixed with the lunar twilight.

"We're right underneath the guide path," Pierre said. "No noise. One bonus of living in vacuum."

Zara noticed the loft. Spartan –like the rest of the flat– there was little decoration except a wire-wound bonsai and flower vase. Near the futon, she caught the glint of a glass case. Intrigued, she crept upstairs for a look while Pierre fiddled with the sound-system.

"What's this?"

"An Apollo 17 artifact," he said, matter-of-fact. "Part of the ALSEP instrument packaged left by Harrison Schmidt."

"Black Market?"

Pierre put on classic jazz then wandered upstairs. "The Katsuhiro estate purchased it, pieced them out as decorations here at Oashisu. There's Kanji there," he pointed at the base and plaque. "Not quite sure the meaning, something inspirational and poetic, I'm sure."

Zara gazed at the antiquated gizmo. Most Apollo-era ALSEPs were analog with crude transmitters, simple but effective. This one resembled a small white box, an orange ribbon cable extending out the side.

"Apollo, billions of dollars and so little science," she marveled. "I guess it wasn't really the point."

"Is Victoria carrying a scientific payload?"

"I haven't asked," Zara said dismissively, "no one's briefed me, but they don't tell me much these days."

"How do you mean?"

Zara explained Titan's apathy, the other Victoria, and her suspicions of a second pilot.

"Another spacecraft and pilot?" Pierre shook his head, incredulous. "That's an awfully expensive back-up plan if they thought you were going to fail."

"They're obviously having doubts whether I should fly at all." Zara took another sip of her drink. "The Pilot, the metastasizing growth, the bleed... They're figuring out what we've already figured out; that's my guess. They think I'm a liability, a mental case. Malik's probably hedging his bets with another mission."

"And this other pilot, he —or she— would also be getting the Pilot implant?"

"It's a requirement," Zara explained. "You can't fly the Victoria without it; the avionics are too complicated."

"A co-pilot."

"Victoria's built for one. The avionics handshake is too dangerous, incorporating a co-pilot's too risky. Grinding gears near the speed of light is bad news. One sensorium isn't like the other. Besides, Legion and Titan only budgeted one pilot."

Pierre looked uneasy with Zara's mortal antipathy. He struck a clinical pose. "You don't have to continue with Titan, Zara. As your bonded advocate at HIL, I can issue a legal memo to Legion. You don't have to fly."

She took a drag on her cigarette and swallowed her last swig. "A reactor blow out at fractions

the speed of light... instant and painless, mission failure doesn't frighten me."

Pierre shrugged. "What frightens you then?"

"Being stuck with nowhere to go."

"I have an idea." Pierre sipped his tea then set it down on an end table. "You up for some tide pool?"

"I played a bit back at the Noctarium, but I was never much good," Zara admitted.

"I'm terrible," Pierre smiled. "You want a game?"

In an obvious bid to lighten the mood, Pierre hopped downstairs and tapped a button near the light panel. A flip of the dining table reveled the lunar analog of billiards. 'Tide Pool' was its nickname, a nod to the effects of the Moon's gravity on the old parlor game. Bumpers, divots, and pylons allowed for lift and aerial ricochet. Thought a cheat by purists, spring-loaded prods replaced the pool cues. Wayward shots were a risk, but with a rubber version of the acrylic balls damage stayed limited to spilled drinks. Pierre racked the table while Zara poured another double Yamazaki.

Offering to go first, Zara cocked the cue and broke. A bit buzzed, her aim was off. A clip of a divot sent the shot high. Pierre caught the ball mid-flight and passed it back.

"Do over," he smiled.

"Shouldn't you be scolding me on mixing booze with meds?"

"If it hasn't gotten to you by now..."

Idly playing, Pierre engaged Zara. While amicable, he didn't offer much, nothing that made for intriguing conversation anyway, but she appreciated his attempt. She learned he'd had a

long distance girlfriend in graduate school. Her name was Gwen, short for Gwendolyn; Zara didn't like the name. She imagined a flaky girl, light-haired, vacant eyes, self-obsessed. He admitted she never visited him, putting the burden on Pierre to travel the hundreds of kilometers of congested railways. Zara silently sneered.

"She studied poetry?" Zara scowled. "You're serious?"

"One of her ancestor's was Baudelaire. Her father encouraged her, something about it giving her a 'steady head' for a career in Trade finance," Pierre replied, acting the apologist.

"Poetry and high finance, interesting," Zara said. "A girl with money then."

Pierre nodded. "Her father was a water speculator for Trade. He broke us up, put ideas in her head."

"You're better off." Zara pulled the cue trigger. The shot kissed one of the center pylons, veered to the right, and plopped down near a corner pocket, sinking one of her own.

"Shit!"

Finishing her Yamazaki, Zara felt flush. The game lingered on. Both players sandbagged to keep each other talking. Thoughts of Titan's royal mind-fuck ebbed, replaced instead by innocent curiosity.

"You should mix a little of this with your tea, add some honey," Zara suggested, grabbing the Hibiki. "A Japanese 'Hot Toddy'."

"The taste's too strong."

"Is that why you don't drink?"

Pierre hunched over the table, aiming his cue at a divot next to a bumper, hoping for a ricochet.

"More or less. Caffeine's suits me better, helps with the long hours, and all that."

"You ever had a 'red eye'?"

Pierre shook his head.

"An espresso mixed with cherry liqueur and cheap bourbon. It's a little sweet but it takes the edge off. It was my drink back at gymnasium. Then after my father left, I left out the liqueur and espresso."

Pierre raised an eyebrow. She hadn't mentioned the wayfarer to Pierre either, or his offer of information about her father. Now, a few drinks down with lowered inhibitions, a stray comment would bring unwanted questions.

"Your father?"

"He left on business and never came back."

"Were you close?"

Zara shrugged.

"Did you all remain in Lausanne?"

Zara nodded. "We could have moved, but my mom wanted to stay. My sister fell into a depression, and I did all the typical rebellious bullshit, late nights at the cafe, absinthe, clove cigarettes, uniforms of black, and books of German philosophy..."

Pierre listened, saying little. She mentioned her *idée fixe* with self-inflicted tattoos. She remembered convincing herself it was a more constructive habit than cutting or hair pulling. With a syringe needle and some Indian ink, she'd blackened her flesh with Arabesque.

"What happened to them?" Pierre looked at her pale uncluttered arms.

"Removed. But I kept one," she pointed to a small Mihandi ring lacing her wrist. "A small reminder."

"Nostalgia?"

"Not sure," Zara said, too drunk to explain.

"What about the other tattoo?" Pierre said, eying his next shot. "I couldn't help but notice it back at the lab."

"The Chronophage. You saw that, huh?" Zara teased. "I was hoping you'd notice more than just bruises and welts."

"Well..." Pierre grinned.

Zara explained the Corpus Clock and the grasshopper escapement. A nod to Einsteinian relativity, Pierre appreciated the nuance.

"A bit sinister," Pierre said, leaning in for a shot.

"How about a butterfly, or a bumble bee, or maybe a flower? Something more girly, you think?"

"I was just saying..." Pierre started to apologize.

"—I was just having a go," Zara winked.

Pierre smiled.

"I've always liked insects, a near-perfect species driven by a single goal, not caught up with their personal mortality. They're nature's little fatalists."

"They're more instinct, than anything."

"Well...yeah..." Zara started to stammer.

The game continued. Pierre gave chase to her woozy shots. Wobbly kneed, Zara leaned against her cue, eyes sandy from the alcohol and exhaustion. She tried to maintain a decorum but with little success. He mercifully finished her off, a remarkable double ricochet to sink the eight-ball.

"Another game?"

Zara shook her head. "No way. I'm blitzed."

"Coffee? tea?"

Zara looked at the half-empty Habiki. Embarrassed, she took Pierre up on his offer. He racked the balls and put away the cues, then wandered off to the kitchen. When he returned, steaming cup of hothouse coffee in hand, Zara had moved to the coach.

"What's the matter?"

Zara wiped her face with a sleeve, her eyes puffy. "Nothing, it's just..."

"It's just, what?"

"The Pilot's going to kill me, isn't it?"

The head scans haunted her. With the digitized lesions, their rooty tendrils squeezed her cerebellum like some squid-like parasite. The image was stuck. Zara shuddered, nauseous. Closing her eyes, she could almost feel it writhe.

"No," Pierre said, sitting down next to her. "It's not a tumor."

"Is it bleed?"

"A misnomer, it's not like a stroke or a hemorrhage. Bleed is more like crossed wires, a synaptic short. If it is bleed—and I'm not sure it is—we can repair it."

Pierre droned on, detailing the intricacies of neural engineering. Zara tuned out. Ignoring his words, she let herself become lulled by his nasally tone. She rested her head on his shoulder and felt a flinch. Pierre carried on, slightly more relaxed. Zara leaned into him, barely awake.

"How's your coffee? It's Tour de Jardin, Indonesian, I think."

"Fine," she mumbled.

Zara had only taken a few sips. Shifting, she sat back up, legs curled underneath her. Pierre anxiously watched her. Zara, hair falling into her face, toppled into him. He pushed against her with

rigid hands, but not enough to waylay the kiss. His lips were cold and dry, pubescent and awkward. Eyes wide, he looked at her in shock. With her sloppy advance unreciprocated, she quickly pulled away. Getting up, she stumbled to the door.

"Zara. Wait."

Something about the safety lock, a special design. Japanese, no doubt, she cursed its over-engineering.

"Zara, what are you doing?"

"Going home."

"Home?"

"Back to the Noctarium. If I could just open your fucking door." She tugged at the latch.

"—But that's over ten kilometers away, through service tunnels and utility junctions."

"Whatever."

"I'll drive you," Pierre offered. "Come on."

Zara shook her head. "No."

"Why not?"

"Because I've made a fool out of myself, and I've had too much to drink," Zara slurred, head down, arms crossed.

Pierre paused. "You didn't. You just caught me off guard. That's all."

"It was a mistake, a big fucking mistake, and I'm sorry."

Pierre's face drooped. A bruised ego, that's all she needed. Desperate for a fix, she fumbled to ease the awkwardness.

"I'm confused, Pierre," Zara sighed, an understatement not lost on Pierre. "My judgment is off. I like you, it's just that... I didn't mean to offend your professional sensibilities. "

"I'm not offended. —Look, Zara. I know you're confused," Pierre said, gesticulating. "Clinical

confused, in fact. That's why I'm trying to help you."

To his credit, he was handling Zara with a level of maturity that surprised her; Pierre, for whatever reason, hid his wisdom.

"If you want to refer me to someone else at HIL, or drop me as a case, I'll understand."

"—No, forget it. You're next drift-dive's in what... two days?"

Zara nodded.

"Afterward, we'll try the mnemonic cues and see what we can dredge up, all right? Now let me drive you home."

"Okay."

[CP] CHAPTER TEN

"Ambush!" Someone shouted.

Zara turned down her audio-jack. Pulling a rifle from the rover's rack, she slapped in a fresh battery. The crew compartment was ablaze with static. A direct hit from a roadside EMP. Bodies – smoking and black– lay tumbled about. She coughed phlegm, her lungs on fire from the ozone. Eyes watering, she tried to brush away the sting.

"Minerva, do you read? Over."

Zara tapped her microphone and mumbled a reply. She checked herself for damage. Just a few melted spots and yellow streaks on her suit. Her scorched mates weren't so lucky. A current node, or maybe a field short had shielded her from the voltage surge. Pulling a helmet from an emergency locker, Zara checked the seals and threw it on. With a gust of pressure, the ozone gave way to breathable air.

"This is Minerva," she gasped. "Do you read?"

"This is Scarecrow. Over. How many dead?"

She counted the bodies. Five in all, most were Legion, special forces lunar brigade. None were pilots. She opened the hatch into the cab. Two drivers sat slumped, their bodies charred to cinder and unrecognizable. Out the cracked front window, weapons fire crisscrossed the road. A column of Legion wrecked APC's lay scattered about.

"Seven in my vehicle," Zara reported. "The unit up ahead of me is still under attack."

The firefight dust-up was thick. Through the lightning, a huddle of legionaries cowered behind

wreckage. The fusillade spared little. From behind a line of boulders, a wave of tracers engulfed the holdouts. The airwaves filled with a crackly blitz, then silence.

"Scarecrow, do you read? Over."

Nothing.

Eyes glued to the cab window, Zara scanned the lunar twilight. Through the gray, bouncing cones of flashlights filled the gloom. Mop up. The unionist cadre fanned out and sifted through the aftermath. Most sported the rag-tag mishmash of outdated Moon gear. A few wore armor, Legion-greaves and shoulder-chest plate, likely reclaimed from fallen legionnaires. For guerrillas, they looked the typical Far Side CGT zealots.

"Minerva, this is Scarecrow. Are you ambulatory?"

"Yes," Zara replied.

"Repeat." the voice broke up into digitized fuzz.

"—Yes! Affirmative! I can walk." Zara shouted back.

"Fall back to the rally point near the Mons La Hire, past the old fire base. Understood?"

Zara tapped her audio-jack. "Mons La Hire, are you sure? Over."

"Yes, fall back to the previous waypoint."

"Scarecrow, who are you, and where are you?"

"We're the evacuation team. We received your Mayday. We're outbound three hundred kilometers. Over."

"Roger that," Zara replied, confused. "En-route to rendezvous now."

The guerillas were closing in, a hundred paces or less. In salvage-mode, they skipped about looking for leftover munitions. Taking advantage

of the lull, Zara strapped on some webbing, filled it with batteries, then crawled out the APC's back hatch. She sprinted away, the extra weight pushing her down for added traction. She followed the column track's twin herringbones back the way she had presumably come.

Zara headed for the Mons La Hire's massif and a ridge just above the escarpment. More weapon fire. Blue zaps threw dust and basalt in giant parabolic arcs. Through her misty helmet, she spotted a crater close by. Desperate for cover, she blindly toppled in. Glasading down the scree, a basalt spur sent her flailing. She fell into the pillow-soft dunes at the caldera's bottom. Rolling on her back, she pulled her rifle and panned the rim.

Minutes passed.

"Come on you fuckers! Where are you?"

Impatient, she unclasped her webbing and let the harness and batteries fall. Slinging her rifle, she clambered back up to the ledge. A quick peak over the lip revealed a wall of dust.

"Hacks," Zara cracked.

Lunar combat rule number one: no indiscriminate fire, only fire when you have a shot, and always aim high. The Moon's low-gravity —mixed with the powdered regolith— created natural smokescreens. A bad dust-up could send ejecta kilometers high, so thick not even FLIR goggles could penetrate. But it wouldn't take long for the sand to settle; she needed to hurry.

Heading back out onto the road, she saw more signs of combat. The APC tracks diverged into a delta formation, each vehicle side-by-side in a textbook defensive maneuver. Near a low berm, she saw the boot-prints of a skirmish line and a scattering of unionist rocket tubes. Either the

fusing circuits were too old or they were poor shots, the guerillas had somehow managed to miss every APC. She saw no bodies lying about. A running attack maybe, or a hit-and-run, it was a tried strategy used to keep the Legion's columns moving towards an ambush.

Under the crest of the Mons La Hire massif lay the shelled ruins of the old fire base. Turret pylons ringed the outer perimeter. Inside lay heaps of scrap and collapsed bivouac pods. Destroyed years earlier, Legion had dismantled the site and recycled the metal. Zara followed the APC tracks into the warren of rubble.

As she approached, something hissed stereo-like through her audio-jacks, then faded to gurgle. She checked the channel encryption; nothing, an open broadcast. Hesitant, Zara armed her rifle and crept in the direction where the signal was strongest.

"Who goes there?" she hailed.

"Help me."

She switched on her rifle's starlight scope. Entering a shattered geodesic of the missile battery's old control room, someone squirmed in the Earthshine. The rifle's flange widened as she toggled over to short-range mode. A trigger squeeze let loose a whirl of lighting. If there were any booby-traps, the electrical distortion would trigger the fuse.

"Stop!" croaked a man. "Please!"

"Who are you?" Zara wove through the shattered walls to where the man lay.

Something inside his suit had malfunctioned, a burnt out isolator or a shorted fuel cell. He was caked in regolith. The charged dust clung to him. Haphazard camouflage, he mingled with the debris.

A brilliant idea, Zara realized, the perfect ghillie suit for a lunar sniper. He reached up pathetically as if to ward off another shot.

"Don't shoot."

Oldest trick in the book, unionist bullshit. "Where's your buddies, huh? Around here somewhere, waiting in some spider hole?"

"No. They left me here."

"Left you? So much for camaraderie, eh?"

She noticed something odd about the CGT guerrilla. Despite her suit's LEDs and the ghost-glow of her riflescope, the man looked through her as if she was invisible. She flashed her headlamp twice. No response. Head bobbing about, he acted blind.

"Can you see me?"

"You flashed a light, but..." the man started, but fell prone.

"Hello?"

He acted as if passed out. A ruse? If his buddies were going to bushwhack her, they would have already done it; this unionist was alone. She circled his splayed body then closed in.

"Roll over. Hands out."

Nothing.

"I know you can hear me."

"I can't feel my feet."

His air manifold was damaged, the suit's rebreather in failure mode. He was going anoxic. Zara repeated the demand. Tedious seconds passed until he at last he did as ordered, rolling over onto his back.

"Jesus!"

A red sheen coated the inside of his face-shield. Now dried, the blood veiled his face.

"What happened to you?"

"Water," the man croaked.

Zara pulled a spare reservoir from her climate system, dropped it to the ground, then kicked it over.

"Near your left hand."

The unionist fumbled until he gripped the bottle. Pulling out his hydration hose, he connected to the spigot to his suit. Zara winced as he slurped, the sound viscerally grotesque. He was in rough shape.

"You got a name?"

After smacking his lips, he cleared his throat then spoke. "Nicolas. My name's Nicolas."

"Where are you from, Nicolas?"

"South America."

His accent sounded faintly Guyanese, but forced and awkward. A transplant or a guest worker maybe, but something hinted at a Continental pedigree.

"How did this happen?."

"A secondary exploded near our hutch. My spotter died instantly."

"A sniper team?"

Nicolas nodded. "My primary air supply was damaged. The suit depressurized briefly, massive hemotoma, the blood vessels in my eye, my lips, my nose... I'm prone to bleeds, but this time... it just wouldn't stop."

"How did you get to The Moon, Nicolas?"

LISP claimed the CGT forces came inbound via Far Side shuttles, launched in low earth orbit by enemies of Trade. The truth was more embarrassing. As much as Legion restricted Lake access, unionists slipped through more often than anyone admitted. Cooks, builders, farmers—even Little Saigon's whores—were known turncoats and informants. Legion's brass and Trade's PR men

painted sinister portraits of 'barbarian hordes' roaming the Moon's empty seas, but it was all bullshit.

"Fuel processing at the Pyramid, I worked the oxygen condensers," Nicolas admitted.

"I find that hard to believe."

"Why would I lie?"

"I don't know," Zara said, curious. "A stray spark and kaboom, you've knocked out Avenger logistics for a month. You could halt all earthbound sorties. All that opportunity, so why this?"

"That wasn't my mission," Nicolas wheezed.

"—What was your mission?"

"To stop deuterium exploration, for whatever reason. No one's exactly sure. They don't tell us much."

Deuterium, the fuel-seed for the Titan reactor, Zara could think of no other application. The mechanical details were classified. Access to that sort of data required at least a Level Three clearance. If the man was telling the truth, the unionists were heavily infiltrated.

"Deuterium?" Zara played dumb.

"Look, whoever you are..."

"—My name's Zara."

"—Look, Zara. If I don't reach shelter soon, I'll die."

"What if I just finish you?" Zara held her rifle to Nicolas's helmet, bouncing the muzzle off the graphite shell.

"I have a wife and two girls at home..." he slurred then paused. Inaudible now, he started to drift off.

Safing her weapon, Zara backed away. Hands sweaty inside her gloves, her fingers ached from a

sudden cool. Her knees wobbled slightly, turning pigeon-toed like a frightened child. Shaking off the fit, she switched over to an encrypted channel and radioed the evacuation team.

"Scarecrow, this is Minerva. At the rendezvous. What's your ETA? Over."

"Scarecrow here. ETA in forty minutes. Standby. Over."

Zara switched back to the unencrypted channel. "You awake?"

Nicolas mumbled a yes.

"Where's your bunker?"

"Why?"

"Because, this is your lucky day."

Using her carbon knife, she cut away Nicolas's webbing and armor, second generation by the looks of it, off-world Legion battle gear long obsolete. Shouldering dead weight never posed a problem on the Moon, but Zara didn't want to make more work than necessary.

"Up the ridge." He pointed to the rocky crest of the Mons La Hire. "Just under the ledge."

Zara peered through her riflescope and spotted a repeater tower. Below was the old radio hut. Abandoned after the Moon's satellite network came online, the structures served little purpose other than a bivouac.

"Are your friends still up there, hanging out?"

"No."

"If you're lying Nicolas, I'll reroute your coolant hose into your regulator."

"No," Nicolas said, a dry cough blasting from his lungs. "I swear it."

She slung her rifle and pulled its battery. Squatting down, she drug the man to his feet and shoved herself into his armpit. Feet on toes, they

managed a marching rhythm. The trail was all rock, the glassy basalt glittering like frost in the Earthshine. Stiff legged, Zara and the unionist staggered along in a tedious dance.

This far east in the Sea of Rains, dawn was close. Soon the vast stretch would be burning silver. A few hundred meters up, the lip of the sun lapped at the limb shadow. Like a vampire, Zara's macula burned from the brightness.

"I've got to rest," Zara huffed, "just for a second."

"Up the next switchback, there's an emergency tank hidden near the cairn."

Legs burning, Zara dumped Nicolas on the ground and grabbed the tank. It was a high oxygen mix with some argon, a typical relief cylinder. She tapped in and took a few breaths. Like a sponge, her corpuscles opened with replenished hemoglobin. Revived, Zara decoupled and hooked the tank to Nicolas's regulator.

"You're getting critical," Zara said, checking his pressure sensor. "Not much PSI left."

"We're almost there. Just a minute to rest and I'll be good."

Zara plopped down beside him. "What are their names, your girls?"

"Danika and Hanka."

"Czech?"

"Polish. My wife, she was from Warsaw. 'Good Catholic names,' she always said."

"Past-tense...what happened to her?" Zara asked.

Static. He started to speak but only maundered. With a lurch, he crumpled and slid downhill. Zara grabbed him and turned him over. The blood covering his face-shield had cracked like a dry

lake bed. Staring closer, Zara noticed an eye blink through the flaking clots.

"Fitzroy-Blanc, the Saint-Elie incident," he croaked.

Like most of Legion, Zara knew it. A rallying cry among the CGT worldwide, the disaster set a whole client state against Trade. Guyana was politically volatile and susceptible to industrial action. A food revolt in neighboring Suriname radicalized Legion's contract laborers. Accusations of 'slavery' made by CGT's technocrats instigated a strike. As a result, Legion's low orbit launch schedules were brought to a halt.

In a desperate move, Colonel Laroque emptied Legion's reservoirs of their Chlorine catalyst, a move to stave off sabotage. The poisonous fog inundated the remote Saint-Elie station, killing thousands of native laborers and their families.

"That's how she died?"

Nicolas nodded. "My daughters and I were on the coast. I was a logistics engineer. We commuted between sites during off-weeks. If we'd been there a day earlier, we would've died with her."

"Why aren't you with your girls? Do you want them to grow up orphans?"

"They're with family, safe on Earth."

"Revenge, then... This is all about revenge."

"I can't accept her death; I never could. Call it hate, call it obsession, I don't care. My daughters understand my mission."

"I doubt they do."

"They've strong hearts like their mother; there's a fire in their eyes. Hanka, my oldest, reminds me of you."

"You shouldn't insult your daughter," Zara joked. "I'm Legion, remember?"

"One's character has little to do with one's ideology."

Zara wasn't sure she believed him. "Do your daughters know you're here?"

He said nothing.

"They haven't a clue, do they?"

He shook his head with a stiff side-to-side, his helmet's swivel cusp seized with grit. Now, she wished she'd killed Nicolas back at the abandoned fire base, the selfish blasé trou duc'. His dirge was nothing more than macho blood lust bullshit.

"I want you to promise me something in exchange for helping you," Zara started.

"What?"

"Leave this place —leave the Moon— and return home to your girls. Be with them."

"I can't do that."

"What if you don't have a choice?" Zara said, her voice wavering in tremolo.

"Is that a threat?"

"The Mons La Hire is a confusing massif if you're blind man, but I'm sure a survivor like yourself knows his way back to shelter. Your mates are only..." Zara paused, her tone vexatious, "a few hours away, right?"

"—Enough," Nicolas said. "You win."

"Done. You leave this rock, and I'll lead you to safety."

Colluding with the enemy, Zara saw it more as an opportunity, an easy way to remove a partisan from the battlefield without killing anyone.

"It's a deal."

The bunker was large, half-buried in the massif's basalt. Like empty eyes, blast slats hid dark windows, no light inside save the odd LED pulse. Along a traverse, below the dish tower, the

airlock door lay hidden under a cleft. The portal was a medieval barbican of reinforced titanium. Unlike Far Side redoubts, the Mons La Hire was in direct targeting range of Earth-launched missiles and fully hardened.

Zara leaned Nicolas against a boulder and approached the airlock. First generation, the security lock was ancient, simple encryption without bio-informatics. It was a lucky break considering the retinal scanner's inability to penetrate a blood-splattered face shield.

"What's the code?"

Nicolas grunted the digits. Zara pulled out her rifle, loaded in a battery, and keyed in the pin. He'd told her the place was empty, but Nicolas was still the enemy; he couldn't be trusted.

The metal door sucked back into the mountain. Recessed LEDs fluttered to life revealing a sally-port and another bunker door opposite. Nicolas fumbled his way up to Zara.

"Are you sure the place is empty?"

"It's empty, honest. No stragglers, I promise," Nicolas said. "CGT's spread thin. That ambush required all our muscle."

Once inside, Zara tapped the door button. With a slam, the outer airlock closed. Volcanoes of white billowed in from the overhead vents. The high-pitched whine of purging gas hissed louder as the pressure built. A display indicated a steady 0.80 atmosphere. Zara opened the second door and stepped into the bunker's control room. A gibbous Earth cast shadows over gear racks and radio equipment. Expecting to see a room piled with logistics, sleeping cots, food packets, tanks, portable heaters, etcetera... Zara found nothing. The place had been mothballed.

"You guerillas run a tight ship." Zara pulled off her helmet and looked around. "No ashtrays even, a bunch of little Spartans."

Retro-rockets flashed outside. Passing over the Earth, the rescue shuttle tilted over as it lined up with the landing site. Scarecrow radioed but Zara ignored the hails. The rescue team would become suspicious when they'd find her curiously gone from the evacuation zone. She would have to come up with a story.

"Rescue's here. I need to get down there before they get wise," Zara said, turning back to the airlock.

Backlit by the open door, Nicolas stood at the threshold, his helmet tucked under his arm. He had a small pistol in his right hand.

"Zara..." he sighed.

Unaltered by the radio's distortion, she recognized his voice.

"Julian?"

He set his headpiece on a nearby console and approached. Through the blast shutters, the first rays of dawn filled the bunker in white. Pale in the flickering ghost-light, Julian —her former lover— stood before her, face sweaty but unbloodied.

"I'm sorry Zara but this is the only way I could keep you safe," Julian said, lips pursed in smug disappointment. "To keep you from leaving."

"Julian... you're a unionist agent?"

"If only it were that simple." He looked down at his weapon.

"I... —I don't understand. Why would you lie to me? Why are you doing this?"

"Because you won't remember any of it. Because I can't let you go." He approached her. "I love you,

Zara."

"Stay away from me."

Zara stumbled back, knocking over a rack of science gear. Like a Dues Ex Machina, reality dropped through a trapdoor. She could only think of escape. But where? She looked outside at the rescue ship now settled on the Mare Imbrium.

"They're not here to rescue you," Julian said. "They're here to retrieve you and me."

Zara started for her rifle.

"—Don't!"

"Or what?" she sneered.

"Or this all will become painful."

"Stop... please stop," she begged.

"If you die out there," he gestured to the stars, "light years from home, it would be too much for me to bare. Not knowing. I'm doing this because I love you. Now, you'll be Earthbound and safe."

"—You're a liar!" she whispered, eyes pinched shut.

"Aiding the enemy —helping a known unionist saboteur escape capture— is immediate grounds for program dismissal. You're too much of a risk."

"You set me up?"

"A 'stress test' designed by Titan and Malik. He approached me and asked me if I could help. I knew how best to get to you, so I offered my assistance. But none of that matters now. You're in the middle of drift-dive —whether you know it or not— and like a dream, you won't remember this when you wake."

Julian raised the stainless steel pistol, a pressure cylinder mounted off to the side. He pulled the trigger. Two quick thumps and the darts were in. Zara grabbed her chest and pulled both

bolts out. Body limp with tranquilizer, her knees buckled as she fell prostrate to the decking. She struggled to pull herself up but fell back down.

"You're a..." Zara slurred, her lips numb.

"What am I, Zara?" Julian said, squatting down.
"I'm a what?"

"You're a jealous asshole, Julian. You always were."

[CP] CHAPTER ELEVEN

"Pompidou"

Cube Zero's flowerpot floated in space then disappeared, replaced by tangerine gradients of a virtual dawn. Pierre removed the Katsuhiro goggles from Zara's head. Like old digital, he'd wired her spinal jack with ribbon cable. Inset among the media panel was the glint of the spinal shunt. Pierre powered down the dorsal and limbic multiplexer then pulled the device from its socket.

"Keep it," he said, handing her the dongle. "For next time. I've copied the micro-voltages into memory and wiped it. It's ready to record again. Now, what do you remember?"

Like an eager child, Pierre lorded over her, anxious for detail. At first, the replay was like any other dream, hazy fragments stitched into nonsense. But the detail quickly dissolved. He started to speak when Zara shushed him. She closed her eyes to concentrate, fighting to gather the fleeting memories.

"Water," Zara said, eyes still pinched.

Pierre pushed a glass across the desk. She took a sip.

"I was outside, one of the seas, The Sea of Storms, or The Sea of Rains. There was a firefight," she started.

Pierre dimmed his office lights. "And then...?"

"—And then I escaped; I ran away. There was a man with me... an enemy soldier, a unionist guerrilla." Zara paused, biting her lip. "But that doesn't make any sense, does it?"

"Go on. Get it out. Remember, we're recording this." Pierre pointed to a nearby camera pod. "We can piece it together later."

"His name was Noland –or Norbert –or Nicolas – something with an 'N'. He reminded me of my father." Zara struggled with the dream logic. Wading through the drift-dive recording was no guarantee, Pierre had warned. The limbic data compression was poor, the resolution degraded, the experience susceptible to information decay. "I helped him. He was injured. His head had exploded."

"Exploded?" Pierre sniggered.

"I don't know, Pierre" Zara whinged, stymied. "There was blood all over his head. He didn't have a face."

Pierre composed himself then apologized, begging her to continue.

"He needed help, so I helped him. Then Julian was with me."

"Your ex-boyfriend Julian?"

Zara's eyes wandered off, unfocused and blank. Caught in the moment, her mouth fell wide.

"You were dreaming about your ex-boyfriend?" Pierre scoffed.

"I wasn't dreaming; I was in drift-dive. He was there with my father... I think it was my father – Shit!" Zara clenched her fist in frustration. "I was angry at Julian."

"Like you were angry at your father..."

Annoyed the session had devolved into a couch trip, Zara got up and paced Pierre's office. Unlike a dream, the spinal shunt recorded experience –a drift-dive experience– based on events from her waking life. No matter the disjointed logic and missed segues, Malik had

insinuated Julian into her drift-dive; she was sure of it. Everything remembered was real.

"This Nicolas person wasn't my father; he just acted like my father." Put out, Zara plopped down into the mushy folds of Pierre's sofa.

"Dorsal and limbic multiplexing is imperfect, like human memory is imperfect. Mix that with a drift-dive dream state and..." Pierre shrugged, "who knows?" He got up and wandered over to the office window. "It was worth a shot."

"This isn't enough."

"Enough what?"

Zara held back. She dared not let Pierre know the wayfarer's offer, the true impetus for the subterfuge. To do so would admit espionage. Complicit, Legion could hold him accountable as well and charge Pierre with aiding in the crime. Divulging secrets to the enemy was a capital offense.

"Enough to make this risky snipe hunt worth it," she fibbed.

Half-remembered absurdity wouldn't offer much when it came to gaining information from the wayfarer. The drift-dive lacked specifics and tactical intelligence, stuff unionists could exploit for gain. Zara wouldn't expect even the most desperate spy to pay for such a fragmented montage of brain puke. The manic chase-down was a bust.

"I need to find Julian." Zara gazed out the office window at the Arc's steamy streets. "He could never hide anything from me. If I could just talk to him, I'll know something's up. He's a shitty liar."

"I'll come with you," Pierre said, gathering his personal things.

Zara shook her head. "He gets confrontational..." she warned, trying to dissuade. Pierre —far too eager— failed to disguise his jealousy.

"I insist."

Zara sighed, resigned. "Fine... let's go."

#

La Deuxième Tour's main elevator reeked of puke and lager piss, a new rotation of tier twos up from the Well. For reasons unexplained, first-time legionnaires obsessed over lunar vomiting. Something about the slow-motion splash of textured yellow on aluminum.

"Among the barbarian hordes," Pierre quipped, nose wrinkled in disgust.

"Boys being boys."

"I was a boy too, but this..." Pierre backed into one of the elevator's corners, trying to miss the floor spill.

The door slid open. The sound of Brazilian dub pumped through the hallways. A few junior pilots loitered in the hall, bulbs of wheat-grass beer in hand. She knew one of the Avenger jocks, a sous lieutenants from Malik's mission brief the week previous.

"Lt. Spanky, how was the Upper Volta?"

"Hot, super hot," Spanky said, taking a sip from his beer. "The laser-link to Lagrange failed in the exosphere. The payload got chaotic, just like you warned. Quite a ball-shrinker."

Zara nodded but said nothing, not wanting to encourage any more shoptalk.

"Anyway, we missed the target," Spanky rambled on, his lip perched high on his horse teeth. "Damage assessment said we hit some fucking camel-

milk farm. A giant blood spot on the desert," he laughed.

"Charming," Pierre chafed.

"—Who's the egghead?" Spanky spat, legs warbled with swagger, chest inflated.

"A friend —Look, Spanky, have you seen Julian?" Zara asked. With scolding eyes, she cued Pierre to let her do the talking. "I tried calling on the way over, but he didn't pick up."

"You guys on the outs? A bit of the ole' love triangle in-works?" Spanky joked, nodding to Pierre. "I'd think a girl like you wouldn't be down for civvies. You're too much of a firecracker, Minerva, or so I've heard."

Zara grew annoyed. "Look, have you seen him or not?"

Spanky started to say something when his drinking mate interrupted. "We haven't seen him, Minerva, not for a week or more. But we haven't been around much lately, orientation and all."

"Thanks," Zara said, looking past the doddering Spanky, now indignant at having his fun spoiled. "I appreciate it."

Pierre and Zara continued down the hall. The party noises faded. The overhead fluorescence enhanced the filth, crushed beer bulbs and stubbed cigarettes mashed into dusty carpet. Pierre sneered. La Deuxième Tour was a far cry from Oashisu's minimalism.

"'Hangar apes', is that what you would call that crew?"

Zara realized she should have been more adamant when Pierre offered to tag along. Jealousy over an ex-boyfriend or an overly protective sense of duty —whatever the reason— his judgments grated on her.

Bitting her lip, she approached Julian's door and knocked.

"No one home?"

Zara knocked again. After a minute, she entered the pin into the keypad cipher. No retinal scanner; alcohol slowed the pupils and bulged the macula. High-resolution biometrics had proved worthless in La Deuxième.

"You're just going to go in?"

Zara shrugged then opened the latch.

Julian's apartment was empty except bits of clutter. His personal gear was gone. The bed was stripped of its linens, slightly askew, as if he had evacuated in short order. A carton of half-eaten spring rolls –now moldy and liquefied– sat open on the kitchenette's counter. Someone had pulled the sofa out leaving a nicotine-stained shadow on the wall behind.

"Spanky's friend was right," Zara said, looking around. "He hasn't been here in a week, maybe more."

"When did you last see him?" Pierre asked, stepping inside and closing the door.

Zara shrugged; she couldn't remember exactly, sometime before her recent trip to Lagrange, the night they'd made love.

"Was he getting deployed?"

"A surveillance gantry in Low Earth Orbit," Zara replied wandering about the billet.

"That's it then," Pierre nodded, his arms crossed. "That's where he's gotten to. Can you message him on interlink?"

Zara shook her head. Agitated, she wasn't entertaining simple answers. "He was in the drift-dive; I'm certain of it. He's not in low Earth orbit. He's somewhere in The Sea of Tranquility,

or The Sea of Rains. Julian's hasn't gone down the Well; he's here... on the Moon."

"The simplest answer is most often correct," Pierre reasoned. "Occam's Razor."

"Maybe if I checked the shuttle manifests, or upload Titan's closed circuit feeds..."

"You should let this go. Dream-stuff, figments, that's all this is."

She shook her head. "I can't. Something's up; something's not right."

"The spinal shunt was a failed experiment and highly imperfect. I thought it would help you not confuse you, but I was wrong," Pierre said, trying to convince her. "Are you absolutely certain it was him?"

Zara sat down on a lounge, head in hands, taken by a sudden ennui. Full of shared moments, the apartment felt haunted. A tear seeped out and rolled down her cheek. Old feelings surfaced.

"—Yes —no —maybe." she paused. "Shit! It just doesn't make any god damned sense. Why fucking Julian? What does he have to do with fucking Titan?"

Julian.

She remembered how they had met; The Swamp King, Legion's notorious twenty-kilometer obstacle course in Guyana's swamps. They were recruits fresh from the academy. Julian had stumbled into Zara crossing the Demi-Dieu, a mangrove slough filled with Triassic-sized reptiles. She had lost her way in the fading sunlight. Julian found her wandering aimless in the chin-deep muck. Against rules, he pulled her clear and offered a piggyback. She held tight, his body like vulcanized rubber, every muscle artfully arranged. After making a crack about swamp slime, he'd left

her on the muddy bank to finish the rest of the course.

Two years later at Le Boudin, Zara remembered his goofy grin from across the bar. She didn't believe in fate, but the chance encounter proved enough of a romantic spark. All that was a universe ago, however. Things once innocent had folded into the paranoid present.

"A clean break, leave nothing behind, move on – that was the idea– but Malik's gone and trashed it, by design no doubt. He wants me to fail; he wants to find an excuse –any excuse– to prove me unfit."

Pierre sat down on the bed, eyes quiet with a forced empathy. "I'm going to change your medication, more Alprazolam, change up the Thielexol. You have two weeks until launch. I'll perform another scan and try to re-engage with Lagrange."

"–I know what you're thinking." Zara glared at Pierre.

"What am I thinking?"

"You think I'm paranoid."

"I wouldn't say that. Do I think your concerns are justified? Yes, but... "

"–Stop with the egghead therapy double-speak. Are you with me or not?"

"I'm with you, Zara."

[CP] CHAPTER TWELVE

Zara awoke to Malik floating in front of her, his chocolate face surrounded by his jumpsuit's sterile white. He looked at her like an artist would a canvas. Zara felt like deviant art –a work-in-progress– skewed from its creator's original intent. Three weeks into post-implant recovery, this was the his first visit.

"White's not your color," Zara joked.

For unexplained reasons, Lagrange's medical techs had recently taken extra precaution. Even the bug-eyed orderly –pre-occupied with Zara's catheter and catch bag– approached her in an environment suit. Adding to the nest of medical sensors, her minders had installed a new array of radiation detectors. The chamber –already packed with gear– grew even more claustrophobic.

"How are you today?" Malik asked, his high-cheekbones perked in a Cheshire grin.

"Less confused," Zara slobbered. "I no longer think that Moldovan nurse is plotting to kill me."

Malik raised an eyebrow. "The skinny one with the knobby knees?"

"–Pig eyes and a nose like a witch," she added. "My IV fell out the other day. She noticed during lights out and accused me of removing it. She thinks I'm trying to escape."

"She's joking," Malik apologized.

"Doubtful. –Can I ask you a question?"

"Please." Like a West African Buddha, Malik folded his legs into the lotus position and floated about in mid-air.

"The past week, all this new gear..." she said, gesturing to the crowd of equipment," the staff's been treating me like a heavy isotope."

In addition to the suits and radiation kits, Titan technicians had installed an ionization ring around the berth's suspensor mount, electrically isolating her from the chamber. The air pressure had also been reduced, her ears crackling and popping painfully. Zara half-expected a hermetic shrink-wrapping to follow.

"There's been an event here at Lagrange that's proved problematic for Titan," Malik explained.

"I overheard someone say 'contamination' or 'containment.' Did one of the Victoria's reactors spring a leak?"

"Nothing like that, no," Malik smiled.

"It it biological?"

"More like cosmological," he winked. "Let's leave it at that."

"Any more detail you can tell me?"

"It's complicated... classified."

"Fine, whatever," Zara sneered. "So, I assume you're here to hand me my release paperwork? Can I finally get out of this goddamned tin can? If I have to piss into a tube any longer, I'll..."

"—Not yet." Malik put his hands together in a Namaste, fingertips rolling across fingertips, the habit annoyingly self-important. "I was hoping to ask you some questions, if you'll indulge me."

Flippant, Zara gave in.

Malik pulled out his stylus and console, scanning a digital spreadsheet for questions. Expecting direct inquiries about mission readiness and pilot profiles, Malik instead bombarded her with spiritual bullshit, stuff about 'the nature

of self', 'phantasmal consciousness', and 'telekinetic influence.'

"—What's all this hippie bullshit about?" Zara interrupted.

"I apologize if I'm having trouble communicating myself," he said, his broad lips pursed. "This phenomenon... it's similar to quantum action at a distance, to be more scientific and less philosophical."

"Go on."

"In quantum mechanics, when one wave-state collapses, to preserve parity, the other must do the same regardless of distance. To measure its counterpart violates the uncertainty principal. If you apply the analogy to consciousness, it might be possible the same phenomenon occurs for thought and emotion. To put it plainly: have you had any recent thoughts that you were certain weren't yours?"

"Whose thoughts? My thoughts? Your thoughts? An alien's thoughts?"

"Foreign thoughts."

"This sounds like the identical twin thing. One twin cracks his skull and the other—a thousand kilometers away—comes down with a migraine."

Malik nodded. "In a way."

"This has to do with the implant, doesn't it?"

"Possibly..." Whatever point Malik was trying to make, Zara misconstrued it. More troubling than his focus on all this gonzo nonsense, was the fact he'd found it important enough to ask Zara about it himself. Such day-to-day duty was typical for Lagrange's peon techs, but not a Titan chief engineer.

"I assume these are Prost's questions," Zara said, suspicious.

"No."

"Then why are you asking me all this head shrinker shit, not busy enough?"

"Like I said, there's been an event we're working to mitigate."

Palms sweaty, Zara paused then spoke. "There's something wrong with the Pilot implant, isn't there? And I'm probably too schizo to know I'm crazy. You're going to debrief me."

"No."

"What's this all about, then?"

"Unfortunately, I can't give you specifics, as that information is..."

"...held at a higher classification level," she mocked.

"Correct."

Zara paused to ruminate on half-cooked conspiracies. Maybe it was a unionist plot, she speculated. A team of insurgents —trained in psychic warfare— had been dispatched to sabotage Titan's only test pilot. Somehow, they'd infiltrated Lagrange to monitor her brainwaves. The seal on the tempest cell had failed. They were probing her from the outside, corrupting the implant. The program's watertight security had been breached...

"—Stop," Malik ordered.

"Stop what?"

"I see the paranoia in your eyes."

"But it might be a unionist plot, that's all I was thinking. That Moldovan nurse —that bitch— she could be a mole. I'd debrief her if I were you."

Malik sighed.

"She could be spiking my IV, corrupting the implant, corrupting my ability to drift-dive."

"Zara, relax."

Her mania had gotten the best of her. The hyperbolic paranoia had lessened, but she was prone to relapse. Breathing techniques –along with a bit of guru meditation– helped, but identifying the signs of her frantic episodes was key to defusing it, so went the theory.

"I'm fine," she sighed.

"Good."

"The answer to your original question is no; I haven't had any foreign thoughts. My paranoid delusions are my own... unfortunately."

"Understood."

"Is that all?"

"For now," Malik replied, adding notes to his spreadsheet.

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Please."

"Are you sure this has nothing to do with Monsieur Prost?"

"No. Why?"

"I'm suspicious, that's all. The guy gives me the fucking creeps."

"The creeps...? Is that why you won't talk to him?"

"The whole Jeckel and Hyde good-cop/bad-cop thing, I can't deal with it anymore."

At first, Prost's questions were straightforward. The Pilot implant caused mild amnesia –so went the official reports– and to insure Zara avoided regression, he conducted a series of lengthy interviews. He explained the questions were intended to identify pockets of scrambled association and insure synaptic health. She didn't mind at first –the sessions were like conversations– but the questions took an odd turn.

After a week of discussing the finer details of her father's disappearance, Prost's friendly demeanor faded into something resembling an inquisitor. The questions were circular conundrums, hypothetical 'what-ifs' asked repeatedly. At the heart of it was Zara's loyalty to Legion, her 'true family.' Through a maze of non-sequiturs, he managed to link her sense-of-self to her father's 'betrayal.'

His faux ire for what he described as her father's 'despicable activities' angered her. Who the hell was he to judge? Her anger was not his - it did not belong to him- but to act as if her father wronged them both was insulting. He had been a CGT unionist, true -maybe even an operative - but his character was not a question of ideology; the two were exclusive.

Prost read off a litany of CGT crimes, documented 'atrocities' spanning decades. After each one, he queried her, asking if she suspected her father's involvement. Not so much looking for evidence as trying to provoke, Prost dug in. He was adamant she joined Legion to get back at her father. All bullshit of course, but the more she spat at the notion, the more convinced he became.

The medical staff -under orders by Titan to not interfere- gave her the Guyanese silent treatment. Keeping to themselves, they performed their duties like zookeepers. At first, Prost's visits had proved a welcome diversion. Human conversation was at a premium. But after one particularly heated exchange, she screamed and demanded he leave. The outburst alerted security, and as a result, Titan filed an incident report.

Apologizing later, Prost blamed his behavior on the complex and nuanced psychoanalytic evaluation

he'd been tasked to perform. Zara forgave him and agreed to entertain him a little longer. With every new session, however, the old Prost reared his ugly head. Zara grew exhausted and refused to talk. The impasse, she guessed, was part of the reason for Malik's visit.

He raised an eyebrow. "Prost's approach is unorthodox, admittedly, but effective."

"I've been through a psyche-evaluation—even a pre-op vivisection— but this... this is beyond simple amnesia therapy. He's breaking down my personality piece-by-piece," Zara whinged. "I'm done with him. After I'm released, I'm getting a second opinion."

Under Legion bylaws, Zara could arrange for an independent review, someone not affiliated with Legion. She had a few HIL contacts back at the Arc, acquaintances who had worked under the Katsuhiko program back when the Pilot was in embryonic development.

Malik started to speak when the lights went out. A chorus of warning beeps muted the HVAC hum as the medical monitors switched to battery. Back lit, Zara saw past Malik's silhouette, through the now transparent one-way mirror. Beyond the glass sat a gallery of frantic technicians.

"The Spur's lost power," one of the techs shouted over the intercom.

"How is that possible?" Malik asked.

"Don't know, sir. There's been construction outside the nexus interchange. A repair crew might have tripped the main breaker by accident."

"Unlikely. What about Hangar One?"

"Checking..." the tech said, crowding around the radio. "Central engineering reports five minutes left in the Hangar One's fuel cells. The

containment field is weakening. No dark matter signatures yet, neutrino count is low –but it's always low– and there's no detectable anti-particles."

"–Malik," Zara interrupted. "What's going on?"

"There's been a power outage."

"I got that. Why is there a containment field? Tell me the truth. The Victoria's reactors are leaking, aren't they?"

"No."

"Then what...?"

"–Please, Zara," Malik replied, shushing her. "I need you to wait."

Two minutes later and the power was back on.

[CP] CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Zara reached out and touched the Regina's abdomen. Soft and malleable, it betrayed the aliens' hard exoskeleton. Through her translucent skein, she saw the prenatal queen inside. It twitched as the unborn do and flexed its moving parts. Yawning a liquid yawn, it displayed its menacing array of needle-like teeth. Despite its bulging eyes and limb buds, the pre-queen had all the hallmarks of its mother.

"When will it be born?"

'Soon,' the queen replied. The Myr measured time differently. A week, a month, a day, all were relative to the species' biology; 'soon' was arbitrary.

"When you give birth, how will it happen?"

'—It will eat her,' Xu interjected, going on to explain. 'At the end of her life, the Regina renews. The unborn eats the mother-queen from the inside, killing her. With innards consumed, her carcass falls away to join her sisters below.' Xu gestured to the bone-littered floor. "When the newborn queen matures, her egg sacks engorge and the cycle repeats.'

"Can the cycle be stopped?" Zara asked.

'That would be suicide,' the queen replied.

"Suicide? but..."

The irony was lost. The queen's antipathy towards her own self-cannibalism revolted Zara. Like a soul trapped in Samsara, she faced perpetual re-incarnation. To be nothing more than a Sisyphean breeding machine defied belief. A worse hell, Zara could not imagine.

'The queen thinks the symbol on your back is the mark of the Masters,' Xu explained, his antennae wiggling.

The Chronophage's grasshopper escapement was pure coincidence, nothing more, but the Myr were superstitious. For them, the tattoo was a symbol. To explain her personal need for self-expression – to explain her body art– would be exhausting, and she had little energy.

"It's like I told you," she argued. "I'm from the stars; I'm not from here. I don't know these Masters; they did not send me."

Xu and the Regina conversed in a babble of untranslatable emotion. Zara waited.

'You've been brought to us as part of the Master's grand design,' the queen said at last. 'You are their emissary; you are here to insure we abide. Whether you are aware of this fact or not does not matter.'

The Victoria's star log, bits of personal nostalgia, a media player filled with pop-trash, photos –anything from Earth; Zara bit her lip and thought of ways to prove her 'alieness.' In the end, the Regina would remain unconvinced; proof mattered little. They worshiped gods. Their faith was strong. Like alien conquistadors, the Masters had subjugated the Myr. If they were truly as advanced as the Myr believed –god-like and omnipotent– there was hope they would be capable of helping her escape.

She was somehow part of the Myr's prophecy, a Xanduvian 'Quetzalcoatl'; fighting it was fruitless. Like Cortez, she decided to assume her mythic place. It was an opportunity. Giving in was easier than fighting it.

"So, what do the Masters require?"

'They require sacrifice. The Cephens have failed. We will starve if the hive is not moved. If we do not appease the Masters, the whole brood will die. In times of irreverence, prophecy says a messenger will come –a harbinger– to announce the queen's annihilation,' the Regina explained. 'And you are the messenger. We must repent.'

"And there's no way I can convince you otherwise?"

'It is prophecy.'

"So, who will you sacrifice? You've no breeding males left..."

Led astray by the Victoria's magnetic draw, then consumed by the beetles, the Cephens' mission had been aborted. The Myr lacked worthy fodder.

'Other males remain.' the Regina lifted a frail claw and pointed to Xu. 'Those who bear witness, the mutants, the effetes, they will offer tithe.'

Zara's heart lurched. Xu was her Virgil, her only friend in the Xanduvian underworld,. So far from home, friends were at a premium. Handsome, quirky, and weirdly familiar, to watch him give his life for bullshit would be intolerable.

'A few like Xu still live,' the Regina continued, her raspy telepathy weak and frail. 'I will sacrifice the witness bearers.'

"Including Xu?"

'Yes.'

"And there's no other choice?"

'No.'

Like Xu, other males –the Cephens' effetes– lived on immortal, but were sterile and unable to breed. Used as telepathic witnesses, they joined their virile brothers on the death quest. Using the effetes' testimony, the queen chose which of the males' genes would continue. Having sorted the

lot, the Proelia culled the larval heirs in a bastardized form of post-coital rutting. Confused and desperate, Zara had no choice but to accept her will.

"How do they die?"

The Regina described the ordeal. Zara inferred a progressively harrowing death, the pain intense; blasts of lightning, a crucible of searing spines, fire and smoke, then oblivion.

"I'll go with the Cepheneffete," Zara said, 'as an agent of the Masters—if that's who you think I am—I will bear witness and insure the deed is done. I will be the Master's 'effete', like Xu was to you. But Xu must carry me there. Is it a deal?'

The queen chattered a nod.

#

The spores strained at their moorings. Their inflated bladders pulsed with gas. In an explosive show, orifices expelled plumes of pollen. Like a microscopic forest, the orbicular seeds clung to the ridgeline in copses. Creatures grazed on the fungus, their mandibles buried in the spongy surface. They were like the Beanstalk beetles, aphids of sorts, docile and impassive, if not indifferent to Xu and Zara's presence. With a crack, one of the spores broke free. The scarab-things toppled to the ground, landing harmlessly near the broken stem. Like a hot air balloon, the aerobe ascended until it disappeared in the haze.

"Is this our ride?"

'The Repletes cannot afford to give us energy, and I cannot store the reserves. This will lift us," Xu explained.

The Cepheneffete males were better gliders than fliers. To escape the Myr's teardrop world, they

rode the spores like an elevator, up the Beanstalk's trunk, beyond the Lagrange point, and past the Victoria until gravity inverted. Above became below, and below became the above. Drifting down to the Master's world, the Cephens' wings would simply act as rudders; no need for lift.

Xu approached a larger spore, its stem more withered than its neighbors. Using his mandibles, he crunched through the woody anchor. A clutch of scarabs fell to the ground and scurried away. Stepping back, Xu grabbed hold of Zara and took to the air.

'Balance is important,' he explained as they buzzed about. 'Once on top, we must not move too much.'

Hovering above, Xu carefully set them down on top of the fungal balloon. The Myr weren't tool makers. Building a gondola or carriage was beyond their means, and an unnecessary luxury; creatures of comfort, they were not. Balancing atop the spongy surface, Zara settled in.

Below, marauding columns of Proelia dissolved into rivulets and merged with the hive. Unfamiliar insectile species filled the air around them, the frenetic swarms energized by the sun. Light filtered through their tiny wings in a chromatic chorus of spangled rainbows. Zara watched in awe.

"What are they?" she asked.

'They feed on what we leave behind. We don't have a name for them.'

Small shoals broke away. The colorful creatures dove towards the ground and crowded around the Proelia like vultures to feed on the scraps. Zara remembered the Proelia's trail of dead, the ever-hungry army scouring the Myr's tiny world for calories.

A wind caught them, offending their delicate balance. With a flutter, Xu righted the spore as they accelerated up along the Beanstalk. Zara felt her ears pop. Burps of pollen erupted then dispersed, the wind porting the fungal seed far and wide. The balloon distended further, its surface taught.

"Where are they?" she asked, scanning the skies.

'I will call for them soon.'

Hesitant, Zara paused then spoke. "I lied to the Regina, Xu."

'Lie? I don't understand.'

The Myr, a single living organism —composed of telepathic multitudes and tightly bound by a regimented social order— had no capacity for deceit.

"I told her something that wasn't true. Human society —my society— cannot function without deception. It's a tool we use," Zara tried to explain. "It's complicated."

'Then why did you lie to her?'

"I don't intend to see you or your Cephon brothers sacrificed, if I can help. I won't let it happen. It's needless."

Zara admired Xu, so perfect and pure, sleek and smooth. Almost mechanical, she doubted if the bungling of Darwinian evolution pertained to him. Like some high-altitude robot, he resembled something hatched from a genetics boutique. His huge moth-eyes, contoured body, and flexible wings were perfectly engineered as if by a higher intelligence.

'It is not up to you.' Xu's telepathic tone was calm. 'It is up to the Masters. The Regina wishes it.'

"But I don't wish it, and the Regina is not my queen."

'If we do not sacrifice ourselves, the Myr race will perish. This cannot happen. You are the harbinger of the Masters' final plan, a warning. We must complete what the Regina wills of us.'

"But I'm not a prophet. I'm just a traveler. I stumbled into all this by accident. There's no fate or prophecy at work here, Xu. Why don't you believe me?"

It was a losing argument. Explaining freewill to aliens was out-of-scope. Tossing out religion and other superstitions, Zara was sure the Masters – whoever they were—had no need for such things. Unless they had an appetite for Myr corpses or used the Cephens' carcaasses to fashion tools or jewelry or whatever, their deaths were a waste.

'The effete serve no purpose after queening. We become aimless wanderers. This way, we are useful. Death furthers life. I do not mind it.'

"But I mind."

The spore ruptured. Yellow pollen coated Zara's suit and helmet like talc. Losing lift, Xu informed her it was time to abandon the balloon. Tumbling into the sky, he held her tight as they fought for lift. Flying, Xu guided them through whirling eddies and into the outer air streams. Minutes wore on. Xu's beating wings calmed her. She grew sleepy. Only two days had passed since she'd left the Victoria, but all without a wink.

Zara checked her console and pointing off into the cloudscape. "We're getting close. We should see it soon."

'I remember.'

"There!" Zara spotted the Victoria, a black dot on gray.

Xu's wings grew turgid. They slowed and circled the Beanstalk. She looked for the beetles but they were gone. Back at the spacecraft, Zara checked the hull for damage. A spiral of vines had grown up along a mooring-lines. Close to the Gaussian intakes, the tendrils had coiled into an access panel, deforming the metal. Zara belayed over to investigate.

The vine was gunmetal in color with a rubbery texture. Particulates hurried over its surface, discrete miniature cells of geometry. Thinking it a trick of light, she floated about for a better view. No difference. Globbs of matter bulged like flotsam in a stream, little bits of the ship siphoned away molecule by molecule.

Zara ripped the vine-thing from the hull. Her hand squished it with ease, severing it from the trunk. Like quicksilver, the section dissolved into beads and puddled on the graphite skin. Droplets condensed then dripped away into free-space, the goop trickling through the air to merge with its stump. Soon, it was whole again.

'The Masters...'

Zara followed the slinking thing along the mooring line and into the jungle. Within a leafy grove, she found a large clot of the pixelated goop coalesced on the Beanstalk's mantle. Another thicker tentacle coiled up from below —up from the Master's nodal world— to feed the liquid machine. Hard points extruded from its surface and formed an articulated arm, its end blossoming in a cluster of milky eyeballs.

'It's a watcher,' Xu explained.

"A what?"

The stalks extended and gazed at her. Each eyeball changed its tint, filtering her image with

a specialized optical membrane.

"What does it want?"

'They do not speak.'

Zara felt a jab in her calf. The watcher had stuck her with a stinger. A thin needle, barely visible, she hadn't noticed the sneak attack. She reeled. The needle retreated into the blob. Tumbling back, she bumped into Xu. He held her as she reached for her leg.

"Why did it do that?"

'Sometime it does things.'

"The hell it does!"

Had she threatened it —this omniscient omnipotent being— or was it some vindictive pseudo-god? Enraged, she shook off Xu and approached it.

"Speak!"

She grabbed hold of the eye-stalk and throttled it like a goose. The appendage dissolved around her fist like before, then dripped back to merge with the mother blob.

"Form a mouth!"

She kicked the thing. A phalanx of segmented plates formed to block the blow. Stubbing her toe, Zara yelped in pain. Xu reached out.

'You mustn't.'

"This is what you sacrifice yourselves to?" Zara cried. "This fucking thing?"

No more intelligent than Xanadu's beetles, the pathetic eye-creature had struck out like a dumb animal. Poison-laced, or filled with toxic bacteria, god only knew what the monster had injected into her. She wanted to get her pistol and fry the monster, but the watcher had retreated.

"I've traveled light years..." Zara yelled. "And this thing —these Masters— decide their first diplomatic gesture is to stab me? Are you fucking kidding me?"

The Myr's worship of the grotesque didn't anger her as much as her presuming they could possibly help. She felt foolish and naive. They were no gods —some perverted technology perhaps— but nothing resembling a deity. Out of fuel, desperate and lost, Zara's hope dimmed.

'It's not what you think,' Xu tried to explain, almost apologetic. 'Small bits know not what the other parts do.'

"I need to check my leg."

She headed back to the ship, refusing Xu's offer to fly her the short distance. She keyed open the airlock and left him to wait outside. Hitting the HVAC, she removed her mask and felt the cabin's cool. Taking a look at the puncture wound, she expected her leg to be inflamed, but found the wound much more benign. Like a biopsy, the needle had removed a tiny patch from her skin and muscle. In its place was a smooth malleable epoxy, hardly a bump. She wiggled the spot with her finger but felt nothing.

Devouring a pre-pack, she hooked into the umbilical and monitored the ship. No damage. No malfunctions. Whatever the vine-thing had done, it hadn't triggered any sensors. On idle power, she'd let the navigator continue to process in the forlorn hope it might further reduce ambiguity. But checking the output, the error estimate had failed to budge.

"It still thinks I'm on fucking Earth?" She pounded the screen. "Piece of shit."

Even if she did have the fuel, she had no bearings. She took a breath. One thing at a time, fuel first, directions later. After a sponge bath and nap, she broke out the Victoria's survival kit and inventoried it. The pistol had a handful of rounds left in clip, not much stopping power, but a deterrent none-the-less. She tossed it in her satchel along with a telescopic knife and few protein cakes. She opened an emergency locker and pulled out a self-inflating shelter. Like a life raft, the device popped out into a zero-G hut, complete with a air-supply and filter. Made of woven titanium monofilament, it provided a shield from radiation. The shelter wouldn't last long in the interstellar vacuum, but as a Xanduvian bivouac it was perfect.

Out the cockpit window, Zara saw Xu perched on the Victoria's nose. His head twitched about as he echolocated his effete brothers with his telepathic radar. Getting ready to leave, she paused at the airlock door.

"What am I doing?"

Her mother called her impetuous. Zara preferred spontaneous. Others were less kind. Ueli, her teenage boyfriend, had called her flighty, rash, and obsessive. Naysayers. In the end, her instincts had served her well; she'd no regrets. But now, doubt invaded.

What was the mission? To save Xu's life? Solicit help from the Masters, whose intentions were nothing less than hostile? Languishing inside the Victoria and starving was no option. Rescue? Ludicrous. Given Earth's distance —assuming this actually was Alpha Proxima— it would take four years for an SOS to reach Legion's deep space

network, and a decade more for another Titan-capable ship to arrive, if another ship existed.

In the end, she had nothing left to lose. She would fly with Xu to the Masters' nodal world. Dying like a animal in a cage was out of the question. Changing into fresh thermals, she climbed back into her suit, put her mask on, and exited the airlock.

'The journey to the Masters will take longer. I am unfamiliar with their sky,' Xu explained, head twitching about. 'The currents and loadstone fields change the closer we come.'

"What about your brothers?"

'I've called to them. They will meet us when we arrive.'

"Arrive where, exactly?"

'Where the currents merge and confusion begins. It is the Ceph's coterminous, our journey's end.'

Hoping for a hint of what to expect, Xu revealed nothing. Zara half-expected a Mayan pyramid, complete with priests and sacrificial dagger, or some hyper-efficient alien version of the Jewish holocaust. But Xanadu defied convention. The truth was no doubt weirder and more savage than anything she could imagine.

Xu whisked her into the violent downdrafts. Tumbling through nimbus, the weightless rains increased. Balls of water collected around them, sprayed into mist by Xu's dragonfly wings. Supercell turbulence knocked them about. Zara felt his grip slip, the drenching wet no match for his spindly fingers. In the tumult, Zara fought back nausea. Hours passed, the turbulence unrelenting.

Unlike the haze of the Myr's planet, its sister planet was storm filled, dark and broiling.

Lighting bursts backlit the Beanstalk. The jungles had withered to expose the accretion column's rocky spine. Circling around, Zara saw creatures – or what she thought were creatures– glomming on like barnacles. Gliding closer, undulating spurs of metal bristled with strange texture.

"That smell."

The air reeked of iron and ozone, so thick Zara could taste it. She adjusted her breathing mask.

'There... ' Xu pointed.

Ahead of them, she saw a lone Ceph in flight. Xu let loose a burst of telepathy, the coded cant mangled and untranslatable. Slowing their descent, the other Ceph braked to allow Xu to catch up.

'Where are the rest?' he asked the loner.

'Coming.'

#

Zara huddled inside the shelter, a thermal blanket synched tight around her. More Ceph had arrived. Their muffled voices filled the ether. Soon the whole of the effete would be assembled for the death plunge.

Like barnacles, they clung to the rock in colonies. There were more of them here. She called them 'gargoyles.' The Master's blobby corporeal manifestations were much like the watcher, just an appendage feeding some distant head information. But despite their numbers, all attempts at communication had failed. One-way conversations with eyestalks and undulating polyps proved fruitless. Time was running short.

Assembled along one of the Beanstalk's prongs, Xu and his Ceph brothers took up their perch. Several kilometers below was the site of sacrifice. The structure flared out from the Beanstalk into a skirt of barbed scaffold.

Rippling with electricity, arcs and sparks exploded over its surface. Somewhere deep inside, a dynamo hummed with a revolting frequency. The electrified umbrella was not the place of ritual Zara had expected. It looked more like an industrial keep-out zone, a perimeter of alien chain link and concertina wire.

Epochs' worth of post-queening sacrifice gave the cage a macabre mantle. Bodies of the Myr males, burnt and fused, decorated the structure's surface. The lightning had cooked their carapace stiff, flesh boiled from the inside. The place disgusted her. Unable to sleep, she nibbled at a protein cake and closed her eyes. Frost covered the tented walls. She activated her suits chemical warmer. The cell's power meter glowed yellow, but the heat wouldn't last long.

This anti-nodal twin to the Myr's balmy planetoid was vastly more hostile. Despite its conjoined exosphere and similar gravity, there was little celestial balance: more Yin, less Yang. Life —if the Masters could even be called life—defied convention. Life was color, lush, bloody, warm and visceral. This place was death. Impatient, Zara threw on her breathing mask and unzipped the flap.

"What if we fly out to the edge? It can't go on forever. We might be able to bypass all this," she said, pointing below.

Xu fluttered his wings. 'Out there, the air is too thin, we cannot fly, we'll have no lift, and we cannot breath.'

He was right, Zara was loathe to admit. This close to the Master's world, the gravity was weak but strong enough to pull them down into the fence.

"I need more time to make contact with them," Zara pleaded. "There's got to be a way."

'The longer we wait; the more dangerous it becomes for us. The Masters must be sated.'

It was a rhetorical argument. As much as Zara tried to reason, Xu's software could not be reprogrammed. To stop the mass suicide, she would need to turn off the Master's fence. To do that she would need to communicate with them. But 'how', remained the impossible question.

"When?"

'Soon.' Soon was a relative word, a few more hours, maybe less. The Myr used the word often, much to Zara's chagrin.

She counted thirty-two effetes perched along the rock-prong. Unlike their soldier sisters, the impotent males were unique. Each bore a rainbow of shiny livery, some with yellow tiger stripes, others in dark indigo. A few wore long antennae manes like Xu, others were short and spiky, some had none at all. Epochs spent as loners in the Beanstalk aeries gave each Cephon his own idiosyncrasy. Nascent genes –immature in the other Myr variants– found their way to the surface. Through subtle quirks of telepathy and gesture, Zara cued in to their flamboyance. So beautiful, all of them, and such a waste.

She pulled out her radio handset and tried another all-frequency hail, but her range was limited. Noise filled the low band spectrum, the VHF plagued by the electrical fire below.

"Come on!" she whimpered. "Give me something."

'If we appease the Masters, they will help you. I am sure of it. Do not be afraid.'

"No," Zara shook her head. "They won't."

'But you are their emissary.'

It was a conundrum. Zara didn't own the logical tools to make him understand. Desperate, she reached out to hold his hand. He reciprocated. Almost human, the soft pads of his hyper-articulated digits were warm. She closed her eyes and squeezed.

"Please don't leave me."

Xu cocked his head, his moth-eyes dilating. Tied into the hive's multitudes, notions of loneliness was foreign. Even when he was physically alone, an intricate telepathic web connected him.

'You are feeling isolated.'

She remembered the hours spent in her bedroom as a teenager, her mom working nights, her sister anywhere but home. Empty thoughts and ashtrays filled with Djarums, the sleepless nights ached with fear. Her melancholy —passed off as manifestations of some crap lyric on a goth-pop record— worked for a while, but it was camouflage. Looking back, those 'miserable years' had somehow curried bad karma; she had unknowingly conjured a monster, and its name was Xanadu.

"Yes... isolated. I don't believe in fate, but this...?" Zara gestured.

'Fate?'

"Like the Cephén sacrifice is your fate, your end."

'I see.'

Xu was trying to reach out. Despite the light-years between them, she appreciated his sympathy.

"Can I ask you a question? Do you believe what the Regina told you about me?"

'That you're a messenger from the Masters?'

"Yes."

Xu's head twitched high and low. 'We do not question the queen. She is infallible. To do so is

dangerous.'

"Dangerous to the you?"

'-Dangerous to the Myr.'

"So, you don't believe me. You don't believe I'm who I say I am."

'I believe you think you're from the void.' Xu looked into the star-speckled miasma. 'But the Master's may have wished you to believe that.'

Like all prophecy, answers could be conjured to explain away paradox. Earth's religions had perfected the art. She couldn't blame him; he wasn't an person per se but a stitch in the Myr's collective fabric. She gripped a horn of nickel-iron and leaned over.

"This is it," she whispered, peering into the electrified abyss.

Xu mimed confusion.

"This is the end... I can't go home... So, I'll die here."

'-But it is not the end.' Xu's mandibles widened into an alien smile. 'Everything is a cycle. Through her self-consumption, the Regina teaches us that we are reborn. You too will be reborn. Each path differs, each epoch slightly different, but conjunction is inevitable.'

"-Like the hands of a clock."

'What is a clock?'

"It's not important." Zara forced a smile. "Maybe I'll take the ride with you. 'Better to burn out than fade away', right?" she half-joked.

Xu said nothing.

Zara gazed into the web. Blue-white Jacob's Ladders slithered through its metal highways, crisscrossing in a fractal light show. She squinted to catch a glimpse of the world hidden below. She felt its hypnotic pull. With a click,

she pulled out her telescopic knife. A javelin extended in an explosion of compressed gas. She gripped the weapon, jostling it for proper balance.

'What is that?' Xu asked curiously.

"An experiment."

She chucked the spear-knife and tracked its glint. Minutes later, talons of voltage and ball lightning reached up and encased the falling spear, the electricity passing through and around it. High voltage but low current, the structure didn't have enough juice to turn the metal molten. One last spark and the weapon disappeared.

'Why did you do that?'

"I have an idea."

[CP] CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Zara hated Malik's office more than she hated waiting for Malik. She sipped her java, the bitter dregs from one of the Arc's late night kiosks. He had flagged the message 'urgent.' But this was no sortie scramble, this was something else. Tucked in, doubled up, riding a wave of anti-anxiety meds, the alert had jarred her out of bed and into uniform. An hour later, she was inside the Pyramid.

Mission emblems and awards crowded the walls. A row of meticulously dusted spacecraft models sat angle-parked in a neat little row across his desk. Next to his console was his squadron photo, a line of puff-chested pilots with Malik standing proudly next to one of Legion's more famous aces. Malik was a company man; fully 'on board' with the program, Trade politics included. Zara was more ambivalent.

She took another sip of her lukewarm coffee when one of Titan's recruits entered. Sitting down at the desk console, he quickly logged in, a weird smirk creasing his face. Zara waited for him to say something, but he remained comically silent.

"What's the joke?"

The recruit batted an eye but said nothing.

"I asked you a question, lieutenant."

"Malik will be with you shortly," he said at last, his tone patronizing.

Agitated, Zara slumped in her chair, hands fidgeting. Something was up —that much was sure— somebody was having a laugh. Anxiety turned to umbrage. It was all she could do to keep from

picking up one of the miniature Avengers off the desk and throwing the lead-weighted model at the twerp.

"Go get him," Zara demanded. "Now."

"I can't to that," the recruit said, eyes focused on the console screen.

"In exactly one minute, I'm getting up and walking out of here unless Malik shows."

"Then you'd be..." he yawned, pausing to key in something, "violating a direct order."

"Good. Call security. Throw me in au trou," Zara said, standing up to throw her disposable coffee bulb into a nearby trashcan. "Anything's better than putting up with this bullshit."

Quickly logging off, the recruit looked up. "He'll be in a few minutes. He's on his way over from the safing bay."

"About god damned time."

The recruit left, leaving her to pace the royal blue carpet. Biting her lip, her stomach tightened with a hollow ache. Whether queuing for the tram or lining up on the tarmac for taxi, she hated waiting. Each second felt like robbery, the clock a digital menace.

"Busy picking up your cleaning?" Zara quipped.

Malik shook his head as he entered, the door sliding closed behind him.

"Sit, lieutenant," he replied, gesturing to one of the office's high-backed chairs.

Lieutenant? In program channels, first names were standard. The formality unnerved her. Something was off. His mood was solemn and out-of-step with his typical Malinki gravitas. Palms sweating, Zara obeyed. Leaning against the edge of his desk with crossed arms, Malik opened his mouth to speak then paused.

"What is it?" Zara begged.

"This is very difficult for me..." Malik rubbed his chin.

"—Is it mechanical?" Zara blurted, eyes wide. "Victoria had a reactor failure, didn't it? The chief mechanic had mentioned manifold pressure dropping during a test. I knew something like this would happen..."

"—Nothing like that." Malik waved his hands, interrupting her. "This is about you, lieutenant. Circumstances have arisen requiring Legion to re-organize Titan after internal review. And I'm afraid I need to debrief you from the program."

The shock disoriented her. The room spun into weightless free-fall. She grabbed at her olive drab, dampening her knees with palm sweat. She waited for Malik to crack a smile, but his face was stoic. This wasn't a prank. Incredulous, Zara's mouth fell wide.

"You're pulling my access?"

"Lt Babineaux should have already setup the paperwork," Malik said, turning to his console. "You've been debriefed from special access before; you know the terms: fines, incarceration, expatriation, and in the case of Titan SX-32, a tribunals carrying with it capital punishment. You will be bound to this agreement for life, understood?" Malik sat down at his desk. Swiveling the console around, he extended the retinal aperture.

Zara said nothing.

"If you'll thumb the screen here..." he went on, pointing to the small rectangular scanner in the screen's corner. "We'll get an eye scan for confirmation."

Zara shook her head. "I don't believe you. This is a joke, right?!"

Malik bowed his head, obviously let down by some ridiculous hope she would quietly accept.

"You cannot be serious?"

Malik carried on, glibly describing her new deployment. Zara bit her lip as he mumbled the details. An Earth-bound mission: Rangoon, gunship embargo enforcement on the Irrawaddy Delta... The notorious mission burned through pilots, a death sentence. She couldn't listen. She got up and headed for the door.

"Lieutenant, you must sign," Malik shouted from his desk.

"Fuck off," she whispered, hitting the button. The door failed to slide. "Release the lock, Malik. I'm heading up to Pyramid Command."

"It won't do any good."

Zara spun around, hair in her eyes. "You can't do this -Titan can't do this!"

"It's all in the release forms you signed when you were briefed. It's all on file, right down to the medical waivers."

"-Titan turns me into a lab rat then makes me run your little mazes, promising me a once in a lifetime mission, and then out of nowhere, you collectively decide to throw me out? I'm sure you can understand why I may be just little bit upset."

"I was not easy," Malik said, voice steady and low, fingers tented in Namaste. "With the implant surgery and everything, the decision to debrief you was not made lightly."

"Yeah?" Zara mocked. "Up all night were you? Did you and your little cabal order takeout?"

"I can say this much," Malik started, ignoring the slight. "There were several documented incidents during drift-dive that were of grave concern to the program."

"Correct me If I'm wrong, but how exactly does torture and interrogation have anything to do with my ability to pilot the Victoria?"

The post-beating haze, the morphine, the trauma, she'd obliged Malik to let it all go. However malign and circuitous the drift-dive scenarios were, Zara hadn't pushed the issue. To do so would have endangered her flight status, and to not fly Victoria -to not execute the mission- was unacceptable. Besides, if Malik wasn't willing to give her answers, Pierre would. She had found a workaround.

"We've had this conversation before." Malik shook his head. "Information pertaining to the details of your drift-dives are classified."

"This is about HIL and my neurologist Pierre, isn't it?"

Zara remembered the post-implant counseling at Lagrange. Concerned with her 'echo-paranoia', she'd usurped Legion and obtained independent counsel by technicality. Malik and the Pilot team moaned about proprietary breach, but there was little legally they could do. Citing an obscure provision in Legion's Articles of Mercenary Endeavor, she had wrestled back her rights. Independent medical reviews were allowed, but only if the injury in question was 'environmental': reactor leaks, nano-radicals, chemical spills, and any other external pollutants. Since the Pilot was an introduced 'foreign body', Legion's tribunal had ruled in her favor.

"We weren't fond of your decision, it definitely complicated things," Malik admitted. "HIL is a contractor here at the Lake, not held to military code, but it was of little consequence in our decision."

He was hiding something, his lips pursed, eyes downcast. Bardu –or some other insider– might have disclosed her attempt at reconstructing drift-dive memories. But if they had discovered her skullduggery, why hadn't they already arrested her?

"You're not going to tell me why, are you?"

"I'm not at liberty."

His will steeled, his lack of passion honed, Malik was a headsman, robotic in his execution. Zara's lower lip trembled as she struggled to gain composure.

"This mission is my child," she started, voice cracking. "Without it, I'm nothing. I dream I'm in relativistic flight, accelerating towards Alpha Proxima, and it's so real. I don't believe in fate, but this..."

"–Stop."

"–I was meant to fly Victoria, Malik."

"–Please."

"–You have to rethink this."

Malik leaned forward and folded his hands neatly on his clutter-free desk. "I don't mean to be harsh, Zara, but you're going to need to forget these prophetic visions. It's not healthy."

"The other pilot you're prepping, who is it? You have two Titan equipped spacecraft. I saw the other ship my last trip to Lagrange."

"–Enough!" Malik shouted, finger pointed at the console. "Sign now. No more questions."

"—I'll find out the other test pilot's name. Legion crews are a tight-knit bunch, loose lips, too much ego."

"—You do that and you risk prosecution."

"So, there is another pilot."

Malik sighed, exasperated.

"And what if Titan's other guinea pigs turn out like me and fail their vivisection?" Zara continued.

"—Hyperbole."

"—Is it?"

"We're done here." Malik stood up and walked around his desk to loom over Zara, chin buried in his chest. "You either comply and sign the debrief or Legion will revoke your flight status. Instead of flying, you'll be stuck out on Clipperton Atoll, refueling sub-orbital bombers. Understood?"

Zara was silent.

"Now, I'm a patient man, but I'm also a busy man."

Zara stood up, ran a hand through her tussled hair, feeling the stub of her spinal jack. "And what about the Pilot implant?"

"Lagrange medical has informed me it can be shrunk using beta radiation and a nucleic catalyst. Lagrange has arranged a treatment regime."

Hands shaking, Zara formed a fist. A solid punch to his square jaw, a nice properly placed smack, that's all it would take. Like a panther she wanted to lunge and attack, but she couldn't; they'd defeated her. Pragmatism superseded zeal. This wasn't a court of law. She had no case. No argument would shift the official decision. She leaned forward and reached out to the console screen, swiping her thumb over the reader. The

criss-cross dazzle of the retinal scanner completed the signing. A banner flashed 'pas d'accès'. It was over.

"Thank you, lieutenant." Malik's cheeks perked in a Buddha grin. "Believe me. It is for the best. Your sacrifice to Titan has been invaluable. Legion is grateful."

"No need to patronize." Zara got up to leave.

"I'm not."

"Bye, Malik."

With a click, the servo retracted, releasing the door lock. Zara tapped the button and left. Inaudible, Malik called after her.

[CP] CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The greenhouse smell and the quiet trickle offered a Zen peace from the Lake's hum. Wandering through terraces of hydroponic jungle, Zara watched the Khmer tend their vertical fields. Dressed in peasant hats of banana leaf and bamboo, they went about their harvest with a monk-like reverence. Lunar farming was by definition sustainable, always in balance, a perpetual thing, and a wonder of ecological engineering.

Le Tour du Jardin was a lunar marvel, five steeples of emerald in the regolith desert. Set against the Lake's northern rim, the Jardin was an extra-terrestrial hanging garden. Interconnected ladders fed a series of waterfalls, irrigating levels of rice, cabbage, taro, soybean, and squash. Lattices of fruit vine partially hid the reinforced walls of glass and the moonscape beyond. Zara had spent the afternoon behind its arciforms. Lost in the tourist bustle, no one paid her any mind. Visitors were common, mostly wayfarers looking for a photo-op.

One of the farmers, a small sinewy man, looked up and flashed her a gold-toothed smile. She'd been staring with vacant eyes, consumed with inner dialogue. Nodding apologetically, she got up from her bench and shuffled away.

She entered the lobby of the Hotel Laplace through a sky bridge. A few kilometers north of the Arc, it was the Lake's business hotel, a lunar stab at a four star 'resort.' Lacking panache, its interiors were stark but stylish, a contrived vision of retro 'spacetopia' mixed with

Scandinavian minimalism. She stopped at the check-in kiosk and pulled out the data fin.

"Alright, where are you?"

She waved the fin over the lobby's holographic plotter. A map emerged, the route highlighted in ruby: third hub, up the central elevator to the thirty-fifth floor, turn left, through the Lunokhod Salon, last door on the right... Zara committed it to memory.

The elevator opened. The lounge was empty. Civvy morning. At the bar, a gangly barbot hummed idly. She walked up, swiped the fin, and pulled a coffee bulb from a courtesy dispenser. She injected a splash a cream and squirt of sugar then gave it a good shake.

"Bloody Mary?" the barbot asked, its synthetic voice booming.

"No thanks," Zara said, holding up her beverage to the bot's bulbous lens. "I've got my coffee."

"The asparagus is fresh from Le Tour Jardin, cilantro as well. We do it special here at L'Hotel Laplace."

"Not in the mood," she said, trying to ignore the automata.

"Perhaps a champagne cocktail? Freshly squeezed oranges from..."

"—I would like nothing at this time. Thank you," Zara said, pausing deliberately between words.

"Three times the size of terrestrial citrus. The Moon's weak gravity allows this variety of blood orange to..."

"—Quiet, please!" Zara shushed, her forefinger to her lips, as if it would help. The barbot, a victim of some inadequate empathy load, was missing her cues. Someone had failed to initiate

its learning algorithms, dooming it forever to be an annoying, intrusive asshole.

"I can see you don't want to be bothered."

"—Fucking A'."

The barbot's lights dimmed, its psuedo-head drooping in machine sleep. Zara took a seat at a cocktail table. With an eye down the hallway, she sipped her coffee. Pulling out her console, she accessed Laplace's concierge using the data fin and ordered a room service continental breakfast. For whatever reason, the wayfarer had obliged her premium access. Minutes later, the Khmer waiter hurried down the hall and knocked at the door. No one answered. Slipping the tray into a door-side receptacle, the man quickly left.

Zara waited a comfortable minute, and then wandered down to his door. With a swipe of the fin, the magnetic lock decoupled. The room was a respectable corner suite with a view of Le Tour Jardin. Four hundred feet up, the first rays of lunar dawn filled the eastern windows, the window blinds filtering the sunshine.

Zara looked around. The maid had done up the room for the day, neat and proper. Surprisingly hungry, she pulled the continental from the room's cold box and picked at the croissant and honeydew.

"You travel light," Zara whispered, searching the room's closets.

Besides a single ironed shirt and a pair of starched socks, the wayfarer's belongings consisted entirely of a shoulder satchel. Getting to the Moon was expensive, tickets metered by the gram, but this was ridiculous. Rifling through the Kevlar bag revealed nothing personal. Besides a wallet of contraband sub-dermal stimulants and a polycarbonate pocket knife, it was typical

wayfarer gear, right down to the anti-vertigo chewing gum.

"You're a boring sonofabitch."

Satisfied, Zara sat down in the corner lounge and unzipped her pockets. Pulling out the components, she arranged them on the coffee table. Barrel to fusing channel, channel to capacitor cell, capacitor to magazine battery, battery to grip and wireless trigger, she assembled the weapon as if automatic. Unwieldy on Earth but average for the Moon, in hand, the lunar pistol looked cartoonish. Bullets were forbidden beyond the exosphere. To maintain security at the Lake and Lagrange, energy weapons were standard.

"Anytime, buddy."

Zara leaned back and waited, the pistol resting in her lap. Minutes turned into an hour, then two. The daily routine of a wayfaring spy was busy. Eyelids heavy, she nodded off, the warmth of the lunar sunrise soothing her.

Cigar smoke.

"This is completely unnecessary."

Zara flinched awake and grabbed for her pistol, but it was gone.

"I saw a gendarme with one of these in the Arc," the wayfarer said, inspecting the pistol with his stogie-free hand. "Though, I never had the displeasure of seeing one in action."

"Shit," Zara mumbled, head in hands. The room-service ruse, lying in wait, all her cloak-and-dagger nonsense had been for nothing. More embarrassed than afraid, she grew flush.

"This is an illicit exchange —I can understand the need for back up— but I assure you, my intent is not to short change," he said, the words rolling off his tongue as if rehearsed.

Out from the shadows, the wayfarer Bernard — Bernard his 'casual' name— had a particular undaunted style, urbane and stylish, almost in protest of the Lake's utilitarian grit. His Fedora was wrinkle-free despite the Moon's humidity. A feat of modern fashion, he wore his suit like a set of pajamas.

"This wasn't an ambush," Zara sighed. "I've had one too many surprises as of late, and I didn't want another."

"A little paranoid?" the wayfarer smiled, his blue eyes beaming in the sunshine. He puffed his cigar and sat down on the bed, tossing the orbicular pistol carelessly at the pillows.

"I'm not paranoid," Zara shook her head. "—How is it you're able to smoke here?" Curious, she had to ask.

"The hotel manager owes me a favor. The detectors have been disabled in this room," he gestured at the ceiling sensors.

Zara, pulled out a pack of Export A's and shook a cigarette free.

"Allow me," the wayfarer said, leaning in with a antique Zippo, the reek of naphtha strong. "So, I can only assume you've had a bit of recall? I'm guessing that's why you're here. Remembered a few drift-dive odds and ends, did you?"

She shrugged and took a drag. "Malik debriefed me from Titan this morning. No explanation given. Something about concern over my drift-dive 'stress testing.' So, I'm out. I'm not flying the Victoria."

"You seem a bit bitter."

"A bit?" Zara smirked.

"Looking for a little payback?"

"—No," Zara snapped. Despite the kernel of truth, she was angered by the wayfarer's insinuation. Revenge wasn't her gig. "I just needed an excuse."

"Too divulge?"

Zara nodded.

"I see." The wayfarer crossed his legs and rested his cigar arm on his knee. "Questions need answers, especially when it comes to one's identity. In your case, those issues —parental in nature— are particularly acute, I would imagine. I believe some people call them 'Daddy issues' —No offense."

Zara grinned in awe of the wayfarer's audacity. He was a presumptive bastard, or a hack psychoanalyst, one or the other. To assume she was some victim of an abusive father's neglect provoked her. This wasn't about 'closure' or 'healing.' This was about forensics. The wayfarer pretended to know something about her father's disappearance, and she was determined to get to the bottom of it.

"One could argue this is extortion."

"—One could argue this is treason."

Zara twisted off the coffee bulb's cap to use as an ashtray. "Touche.... Look, monsieur, let's do this. I'll show you mine, if you show me yours."

"Fair enough," the wayfarer smiled. "Now... tell me what you remember about your drift-dives."

"In full disclosure, I don't remember much."

It didn't seem to matter to him. The wayfarer urged her to divulge what she could. She described her ill-conceived scavenger hunt: Pierre's plan, recruiting Bardu, the theft of the Titan's mnemonic, the shunt recorder and playback. She muddled through the incident at the The Sea of

Storms. Awkward pauses perforated by retractions, she stitched together the dreamy narrative. Careful to not arouse doubt, Zara navigated the bizarre Nicolas/Julian event with care. Admitting he'd used her father to manipulate her would be to admit weakness. She left out that particular canard. More curious than perplexed, the wayfarer took careful note as she continued her hackneyed retelling.

"Your ex-boyfriend Julian, but why?"

"He told me he was there to protect me, to keep me from the mission, typical Julian bullshit."

"Are you sure it was him? You said it was all very 'dreamy'."

"It was him. I'm sure of it. He shot me."

"He shot you?" The wayfarer looked at her with genuine surprise.

"With a tranquilizer dart."

"Anything else?"

"According to Bardu, Malik ordered an interrogation while I was in drift-dive, water-boarding, soft torture, that sort of thing. It was before I obtained the mnemonic. I don't recall any of it. I believe what Bardu told me. He's too thick to lie."

"Did Bardu mention anything about you disclosing classified info during the session?"

"Disclosure's a nebulous word." Zara stubbed out her cigarette. "—Look. I've got Exabytes worth of technical data on Titan, right down to the Feynman diagrams of the reactor chain. I can even give you the specs for the Victoria's micro-gravity toilets, but what I don't have is any real recollection of my drift-dive experiences. It's a mess," she said, tapping her temple.

The wayfarer's face soured, tongue clicking against teeth in a 'tsk.' "That's not what interests me. I don't care about all that nuts 'n' bolts mechanical trivia," he sneered.

"Trivia? You're telling me you —a spy— have no interest in the technical details of Legion's most advanced R&D program?" Zara exclaimed, incredulous. "I find that very hard to believe."

"The Pilot is what interests us. The implant, with all its derivative uses, proves a security challenge to CGT. We're certain Legion's planning on weaponizing the technology for infiltration applications. We are gravely concerned."

"—You are from the CGT, then. I assumed as much."

The wayfarer winked.

Outlawed by Trade and hunted by Legion, CGT recent membership had been resigned to the anonymous squalor of Earth's backwaters. They operated as guerrillas, a viral counter to Trade's 'objectivist corporate cabal' —or so went the manifesto. She'd suspected her father had been a CGT 'gremlin,' a saboteur tasked with virus uploading, bomb deployment, and targeted assassination. He fit the profile.

"So much for Lake security, eh?" Zara smirked. "Three-hundred and eighty thousand kilometers away, and Legion can't stop the rats from crawling up the anchor line."

"You wouldn't believe," the wayfarer said, puffing his cigar.

"So, what's all this buy me?" Zara sighed. With her impatience in redline, she wanted to leave. "Are you going to cough up my father's death certificate, or is this all a ringer, a ruse, a setup? Maybe you're a LISP cop?"

The wayfarer pursed his lips, eyes squinting in mild disappointment. He wasn't buying her second-hand regurgitation. The info she provided was worthless. She knew it. The Pilot implant was a cipher, its spindle and tumblers hopelessly spun. Defeated, Zara got up and walked over to the room's eastern window. The sun's rising bulge blackened the Lake's shallow horizon. Closing her eyes, cosmic tracers streaked her retina. Images, abstract and fantastical, emerged, artifacts of Lagrange's mind-fuck. She had dismissed the nonsense as bleed, but like a street prophet, the visions evoked. Desperate now, she realized she'd nothing left to lose.

"There is something else."

"Oh?"

"It doesn't have anything to do with drift-dive. It's a byproduct of the implant, but more real, more like memories."

"I would be most interested..."

"If I tell you, you have to promise you'll keep your end of the bargain. I have to know what happened to him."

The wayfarer removed a jewel box from inside his coat pocket. Handing it to Zara, she pulled it close to her chest and cracked the clamshell. Tarnished but readable, the embossed tag read 'Jean Francisco Calle' Elf Aquitaine International.

"We were friends, comrades," the wayfarer said. "He gave this to me to give to you."

Zara nodded, throat tight, eyes wet. She caressed the engraved brass and RF-chip inset with her thumb.

"He's not alive, is he?"

"Before we get into all that, this something else, you mentioned... tell me."

Zara struggled to find an analog, the experience so real and vivid. She remembered a trip she'd taken with her family to San Sebastian as a child, before her sister Margot was born. So excited, she'd let her imagination run wild in anticipation. She envisioned the holiday beforehand, constructing minutia and detail in her mind from post cards: the oval bay, the golden sand beaches, the lush mountain bowl filled with its white high rises, the smells, the sounds... After a sleepless night on the train, she remembered stepping out onto the conapt's balcony for the first time. The view was just like she'd imagined, so perfect, it felt like *déjà vu*.

"I'm a skeptic, but I've had these recurring dreams. They started after Lagrange, after the implant. Precognition, forethought, augury, allegory —they mean something, but I'm not quite sure what. All I know is that the Pilot's responsible, some side-effect of the implant; it's the only explanation. The visions are fantastic, bizarre. They can't be real; they're a metaphor, but..."

"—I understand." The wayfarer got up to get a drink from the wet bar. Taking a sip of from his whisky, he sat back down. "Please continue."

"It's another world —two worlds actually— hooked together like a dumbbell. Like heaven and hell, each one is populated with gods, angels, and demons. I flew the Victoria there...in the dream. I'm trying to get home. I'm a stranger, like a lost soul in limbo."

The wayfarer perked, his interest piqued. Zara grew embarrassed from its sheer lack of originality. Like the 'Harrowing of Hell,' 'Dante's Inferno,' or 'Milton's Paradise Lost,'

the whole thing stunk of a recycled myth, some rehashed fairy-tale pastiche.

"The angels have wings —of course— and one of them befriends me. We fly to one of the worlds. It's sort of like 'heaven,' but no Corinthian pillars, clouds, or white robes —none of that shit. The landscape is granular, like an image from an electron microscope, terrifying but beautifully alien. The angel leads me to the court of a goddess, a deity queen. Paranoid and obsessed, she preaches 'annihilation.' She's dying."

"—You say she's obsessed?"

"Like Persephone, she goes on about rebirth and renewal, self-destruction and self-creation. She tells me that the angel and I must travel to this other world, this hell. She tells me that in the abyss, I'll find my path home. The vision gets blurry after that." Zara pinched the bridge of her nose, the mental images fading. She found the wayfarer's persistent interest in her psychotic ranting bizarre. "Doubling up on the Thielexol's helped, but..."

"—Thielexol?"

"It's an anti-déjà vu medication Pierre at HIL prescribed to help prevent complications. He's my neurologist. It might be a catalyst for this parallel experience, this alter ego. But just how the Pilot instigated it... I haven't a clue." Zara plopped down in the lounge, shoulders hunched.

"What did Pierre say about this phenomenon?"

"I haven't mentioned it to him. You're the first person I've told. "

Like her visions of San Sebastian, she'd dismissed the premonitions as some heightened expectations on a feedback loop. But now,

debriefed from Titan completely, the inevitable dream amounted to nothing more than schizophrenic delusion.

"Where do you think this vision came from?"

She shrugged. "Fear of the unknown, a way to cope with the fact that I could die a horrible lonely death light years from home."

"Do you think you'll remember more? Are these visions getting cloudier or clearer?"

"Clearer," Zara answered. "Most definitely, but they've revoked my Titan access. I won't be flying the Victoria. None of it came true. Maybe I'll just forget it all, huh?"

"Maybe."

Zara tapped out another Export A and gestured for a light. The wayfarer, reaching into his savannah beige sport coat, obliged her with a Naphtha Zippo.

"Your turn," Zara said.

"Fair enough."

"He's dead, isn't he?"

The wayfarer nodded.

She'd suspected as much. Gone for weeks at some remote Al'Hagggar gas well, the day-to-day of her father's working life was a mystery. A gas cracker, he had engineered a deep-strata derrick for Elf Aquitaine. She remembered the photos. Surrounded by a gritty wasteland, attacking the Sahara for its last remaining hydrocarbon molecules, he was on another planet.

"Your father and I used to play patanque with old loader bearings. There was this little gravel pit in the depot yard. We would wind down with a shot of cognac and a game. I lost a lot of money to Jean."

Down at the park, her mother lamented his patanque playing. The gambling bothered her. As a girl, before puberty and boys, she used to tag along, anything to be closer to him. Like the strike of a match, his affections were brief but bright. Zara craved his quick smiles and short hugs, never angry, always calm.

As the wayfarer relayed anecdotes, a tidal flow of memory flooded in. The wayfarer's memories of her father mirrored her own. He had a way with people, always sincere, always giving people the benefit of the doubt. She was not surprised he'd made so many friends. As the wayfarer continued, the narrative shifted to the inevitable.

"In those days, CGT was more tolerated in Africa," the wayfarer continued. "'Upset the union and face the Toureg marauders': that was the rule. We paid the Toureg guerillas well for protection and leverage. Legion wasn't on contract as of yet, and Elf had little guarantees from Trade. After our third year, CGT ordered us to Equatorial Guinea."

"—My father was never in Equatorial Guinea."

"As far as you knew," the wayfarer winked. "Elf Aquitaine's field management was infamously corruptible. A few buy-offs bought us an 'off-the-books' transfer. CGT sent us down to unionize the hydrocarbon workers of the predatory Dongala viceroy. It was a challenging post, to put it mildly. CGT posted us on deep ocean platforms based off Sao Tome. Once there, we attempted to recruit union bosses."

"—But I would have known all that," Zara protested. "My father never kept secrets from us. He wouldn't."

"Just as you're required to safeguard classified data under penalty, so are CGT agents. Surely you understand. We were at war with Trade and its Legion mercenaries. Lives were at stake. Secrecy was essential."

"There's always exceptions. Rules can be broken." Zara raised an eyebrow to the obvious. "In your case, it's apparently a matter of personal discretion, eh?"

"But as a rule..."

Still suspect, Zara gestured for the wayfarer to continue.

"Jean and I convinced a cadre of bosses to order a work stoppage on all of Elf's twenty platforms. Gunboats from the mainland –filled with Legion-trained pirates from the Doualla Aftermath– soon arrived. Your father planted explosives as a precaution. Imploded properly, they would seal the well. Forced to create a new bore, Elf would hemorrhage profits as they wasted agonizing months."

"The fire. He was immolated, wasn't he?"

Zara remembered the news, what little news had managed to leak into the free press. The wellhead explosion had collapsed the city-sized rig, the super-dense gas producing a kiloton detonation. The resulting slurry spill wiped out what was left of the littoral fish stocks. Thousands starved.

"I was back on Sao Tome when it happened. We exhausted our start-up funds to finance an escape. Equatorial Guinea was a catastrophic failure for CGT."

"Why didn't Trade make hay?"

"It would've exposed Trade and Elf-Aquitane's ineptitude, their strategic weakness. Acts of terrorism are nothing but a nuisance to Trade, a

matter of public relations. In the end, it's ineffective. 'Might makes right.' Thus enters Legion."

"Men —hundreds of them— were lost in that accident, burned alive, and you're saying my father was responsible?"

"Collateral damage." The wayfarer pulled out a kerchief from his suit pocket to dab his forehead.

Zara got up.

"Where are you going?"

"I need to use your bathroom."

Zara closed the door and filled the sink with water. She splashed her face. Her stomach —already sour from the stale lounge coffee— churned. Looking in the mirror, the old agnosia crept back; the bloodshot eyes, the sunken cheeks... Worse, her face looked silly and idiotic, like it didn't belong.

"Why did I do this to myself?" she whispered. "I was better off."

Head slung over the aluminum washbasin, she forced back a wretch. Fist in mouth, she bit down. Teeth pinched into knuckles, her throat froze in a silent scream. What to do? Zara opened the bathroom door and grabbed her pistol from the bed pillow.

"I should kill you," she said, aiming the weapon.

"That would serve little purpose." The wayfarer got up from the edge of the bed. He casually wandered over to the window, indigo eyes alight in the new lunation. "I was his friend. True. But I'm also just the messenger."

"Bullshit!" Zara's gun hand strained as her arm shook. "I disclosed Legion's secrets, committed a

capital crime, and for what? For you to muddy my father's name?"

"Now, Zara." The wayfarer pulled his cigar out of his mouth and exhaled a smoke ring. "Facts are facts. 'Caveat emptor' and all that. I so wished Jean's death had been nobler, but..."

"—I don't believe you. You're a liar. You made all this up. My father would never be friends with you."

"You knew very little about your father, I'm sorry to say. You were only a child."

Now adversarial, the wayfarer antagonized her. "What if I blow you away, right here, right now?" Zara waved the pistol about with a wild smile. "Then Titan's secrets never leave this room."

"I'm a heart patient, Zara." The wayfarer tapped his chest. "And as a result, I've been implanted with an electrocardiometer linked via neurotransmitters to my medulla. Coupled to the feedback system is a low-frequency wireless transmitter used for diagnostics. Anything can receive the small pulse signal, anything including a few well placed detonators fitted with a dead-man's switch."

"I went through your room," Zara interrupted. "A heart patient who smokes cigars...? You're bluffing."

"When you searched my room, did you check the vents near the pressure glass?" The wayfarer gestured to the windows. "You should see how small they can package C-6 these days."

"I don't believe you."

"Suit yourself." The wayfarer shrugged, complacent. "Look, this isn't how I wanted all this to end," he carried on. "Your father was a friend —whether you believe it or not— and CGT

needs intel on the Pilot implant. I thought this a perfect opportunity for both of us to get what we wanted. Unfortunately, the truth is always more dirty than we imagine it."

Zara's head rang. The back of her eyes throbbed. Competing thoughts froze her mind. If he was lying, and she killed him, LISP would link her to CGT and accuse her of being a union sympathizer. The Lake was lousy with photogrammetric cameras. The detective work would be a 'no brainer.' If he wasn't lying, they'd both be charged with espionage then executed; blood mist on the regolith seas. Zara safed the weapon.

"Wise choice."

"Shut up," she mumbled. "Not another word."

Debriefed from Titan and ordered to slog it in Burma's Irrawaddy Delta, with her father nothing more than a disgraced terrorist, Zara's reality inverted. Like an asteroid striking the Cretaceous Earth, in less than a day, her world had ended. Tossing the pistol back on the bed, she headed for the door.

"Again, I wish this could have been more cordial, but..."

"—Enough!" Out in the hall, Zara jammed the data fin into the door slot and closed it. "Not another word." Exhausted, she could only think of the Noctarium, her billowy duvet, and its promise of illimitable sleep.

[CP] CHAPTER SIXTEEN

With two minutes until the start, Zara felt a surge of pre-match anxiety. One against three: the 'alone and unafraid' scenario. Two twitchy scorpions and a mantis hopper idled in the empty cistern, their pilots comfortably lounging kilometers off at Le Boudin.

Jacked into her umbilical, Zara exercised the Va-gas. Her unit was a bipedal dreadnaught. Squat like a gorilla but with long crushing arms, the machine had been engineered for strength. Zara lumbered around the empty cistern and explored the robot's sensorium. The pit mechanics had put in an impressive amount of work. It drove like a luxury car, gliding with precision and strength. Fabricated from a second generation deep-mer rig, its frog-like feet and low center of gravity gave it uncanny stability.

She puckered and spat. A jet of white-hot fuel erupted from the gorilla's chest. Zara loved fire-breathers. By league rules, each Va-gas could wield one 'ballista,' a special auxiliary weapon approved by Le Boudin's umpires. Most ballistas were unconventional projectile weapons —pneumatic harpoons, flamethrowers, and net guns... On occasion, however, ingenuity built a more lethal arsenal.

Zara remembered one particular Va-gas mechanic who had managed to pipe a regolith blower into their robot. Like a sandblaster, the device discharged a blast of razor-sharp moon dust into enemy u-joints. The machines froze instantly, immobilized and paralyzed. Le Boudin was on fire

with cries of forfeit and drunken fisticuffs. The league banned the weapon a few days later.

Thirty seconds to go, and Zara crept up to the battle line. The arena was larger than normal. Zara didn't remember the place. Freshly bored, its hermetic walls were virginal, clean of stains from basalt-air interaction. Above, the tungsten glare bathed the cavern in bright monochrome. Zara looked around for the camera pods but saw none. Va-gas battles were a spectator sport. It was a waste not to broadcast a match. Whatever...

Squatting like a sumo wrestler, Zara readied to lunge. She needed to take out the mantis first. An aerial attack along with the scorpion's assault divided her strength. Disabling the mantis first would allow her to focus on the ground attack. Efficiency was key in the 'all-against-one.' With the blare of the starting horn, Zara hopped forward, both massive arms extended high.

Exploiting the Moon's gravity, the mantis bounded over her, escaping her clumsy hydraulic grip. Tucked into a roll, Zara flipped her Va-gas upright. Standing her ground, she readied herself against the approaching scorpions. Arcs of lightning exploded from their whiptails. The jolts entered her machine through the head and chest. Ionized dust exploded in a blue halo. The voltage—like EMP—stalled her gorilla, its servos struggling for current. Unnerved, Zara toggled down the pain synthesizers.

She blinked out of the umbilical. Nothing. Instead of Le Boudin's smoky battle lounge, there was only black, her sensorium unable to resolve reality. She felt the weight of gravity gel push against her, dampening every squirm. Somewhere beyond, a turbine whined low and loud.

"I'm inside!"

Through the inertial goo, a muted kick knocked the wind from her lungs. Blinking in, the Va-gas materialized around her.

On the ground, the episode had cost her. The mantis had knocked her into the dust with its powerful legs. Pincers sheared into graphite. Both scorpions tore at her limbs in a hydraulic quartering. Zara spat flame. A ball of yellow-blue engulfed one of the scorpions, blackening its graphite shell with kerosene napalm. Zara grabbed hold of its smoking whip, rolled over and hammer-tossed it into the mantis, toppling them both into a smoldering heap.

Zara tried to claw away, but the second scorpion latched on. A blown polymer tendon crippled her knee, the pain amplifiers muted by the umbilical fuse. She looked down. The scorpion had almost severed her ankle joint; its maw clogged with spilled fluid and severed actuators. Breaking free, Zara limped away on her remaining appendages. Gaining distance, she skidded to a halt and readied herself for the next wave.

'To the death,' there was no doubt. Zara was fighting for her life. Bandied about like an oft-repeated urban legend, Le Boudin's bourbon-filled conspiracy theorists were fond of spreading 'death match' rumors. Unsanctioned, held in secret, the bouts were alleged throwbacks to Napoleonic duels. Macho bullshit, Zara never put much stock in the rumors, until now.

Watching the mantis and scorpions reconstitute, Zara sized up her opponents. No room for bulbous inertia pods, her opponents were all machine, no human pilots in-situ. Cheaters. The fix was in. This wasn't a duel; it was a lynch mob. She'd

fought Va-gas too many times to give herself the odds-on. Zara scanned the arena for escape. A catwalk dangled from the cistern's domed ceiling, its gantries strung with tungsten flood lamps. Thirty meters up, her Va-gas would need a rocket boost to reach it. She frantically plotted her escape.

The trio of mechanized arthropods closed in. Flanked by the scorpions, Zara had little room to maneuver. The mantis advanced, extended its foreleg ballistas, then hurled itself at her. A mimic of its insect namesake, barbed rods stabbed down with explosive force. Zara crossed her ape-like forearms. The impact knocked her back. Tufts of mono-carbon dangled from her gauntlets, the mantis's razor-sharp barbs slicing through. Like a gaping wound, the damage exposed hoses and wrecked servos. Another hit and both her arms would be rendered useless.

The scorpions delivered another jolting dose. Twin arcs broke the air with voltage. She blinked out to bypass the synthetic pain. Physically trapped inside the Va-gas, there was no escape, however. Its reality was her reality. Waves of shock permeated the squishy folds of gravity gel. Burnt rubber and ozone filled the pod. Zara coughed a muffled scream. She had to get away.

Blinking in, she looked through the gorilla's oculars and studied the arena. The main cargo doors —used for assembly and maintenance— were shut. Pressure steel, they would be impossible for a Va-gas to breach. She located the cistern's flow pipe. Missing its pump/filter assembly, the portal remained welded shut. If breached, she would be able to escape through the aqueducts, assuming they were still dry. A quick knock with a

hydraulic ram and she'd be through. She needed to get to it first. Shouldering her way through the scrum, she hobbled on.

Another kangaroo kick from the mantis blasted her into the sand. Its forelegs slammed down, the spikes puncturing her Va-gas through its broad torso. Pain. A near miss, the mantis's barbed spikes were inches away. Zara blinked out but it was too late. She fought for breath. Cold oozed into the inertia pod, a mix of hydraulic fluid and polymer grease. Wet daylight poured in. Zara triggered her surrender beacon. Nothing. The mantis continued to tear away.

Zara opened the hydrogen turbines to maximum burn. She struggled to crawl. The mantis ripped at her back while the scorpions fought over her remaining foot. A catalog of damage overwhelmed her sensorium. The malfunctions cascaded into quasi-paralysis.

At the opposite wall, she clawed the flow-pipe's seal with twitchy robotic fingers. Like lions pulling down a buffalo, her enemies strangled the mechanical life out of her machine. The damage alarms numbed her. With its spinal axle broken and turbines shattered, her gorilla was all but dead. Time to evacuate, but how?

Out in the open –a pulpy blob of flesh– the Va-gas would annihilate her. Only one option remained. Zara diverted the fuel cell's remaining hydrogen into an auxiliary turbine then dumped the clutch. With a dying lurch, she heaved the Va-gas forward on crumpled arms, head butted up against the valve seal. Jelly poured from the flamer spigot as she emptied the ballista of its napalm. The viscous kerosene pooled in the sand near the

flow pipe's galvanized plug. A flick of the sparker and it was time to blink out.

Like a yoke spilling from an egg, Zara popped the hatch and clambered out of the Va-gas' pod. She toppled on to the arena floor. A burst of flame blinded her, the napalm ember turning the seal's alloy molten. The mantis, perched atop the gorilla's corpse, stumbled back on its legs. The scorpions —their IR targeting sensors saturated— scuttled back and reared, whips pointing aimlessly. Crawling then running, Zara used the distraction to reach the opposite wall. Dropping into the sandy floor, she curled tight and covered her head.

A boom then a hiss boiled into a jet howl. The napalm's fiery fountain licked the catwalk tens of meters above. In a flash of light and smoke, the fuel was spent. Zara looked up. The enemy Va-gas had repositioned and abandoned their quarry.

Still. she had to remain still. One move and the Va-gas would be background filter the visual noise, movement displayed in a ghost of tiny vectors.

Was the valve breached? She couldn't tell. Too much wreckage, smoke, and dust. The phalanx of Va-gas remained. She would have to evade them to reach the pipe. But it was impossible; her plan had failed. The portal remained intact. She was exposed. Like a desert lizard, she wiggled into the arena dust, coating her oil-soaked flight suit with a sandy camouflage. One lightning bolt away from death, Zara hid and waited.

A trickle wetted the sand around her, quickly turning it to mud. Eddies swirled in the regolith as the fountain gushed from the ruptured valve. A geyser of steam exploded from the super-heated

flotsam. The pipes weren't empty but filled, her would-be escape route nothing but a column of water. Fumbling in the frothing gush, the Va-gas struggled to hold their ground.

The machines were the Moon's workhorses, originally designed for the desiccated landscapes of vacuum. A few drops of water would short their hyper-engineered induction circuits, corrupting the machine's electromagnetic nervous system. The result was robotic epilepsy. Seized by a herky-jerky jitter, the enemies struggled to right themselves in the watery flow.

Maimed but dangerous, they spotted her as she fumbled about. The mantis pivoted then stumbled in her direction. Its cricket legs warbled as shorts hobbled its joints. Tripping then falling, it sent up rolling waves that slapped Zara's shins. After another storm of twitches, the machine finally succumbed. Zara crept up and gazed into its dilated oculars. Somewhere behind the sheen of UV-coated rainbows, a human enemy gazed back at her.

Why was she here?

Even in a drunken fit of depression, she would never willingly 'throw in' for a Va-gas 'battle royale.' Mind adrift in trance, the ceaseless questions dazzled. Water sloshing at chest level, the Va-gas nearly submerged by choppy blue, Zara at last shook free her catalepsy. Chilled now, she started to shiver.

She floated with the rising water. It'd had been years since she'd swam. Open water —besides the Arc's ubiquitous street puddles and the Noctarium's aquatic menagerie— was rare at the Lake. Zara had never swam 'off-world.' On the Moon, drowning would be an ironic, if not an embarrassing death. Super-buoyant in its languid

pull; to sink required a transmutation into pure stone.

Zara floated in the rising chop. Minutes faded into fractions of an hour as a lukewarm current muted the cold. She luxuriated in the water. A few meters above, a ladder dangled from the catwalk's deck, close and nearly reachable. She paddled over and patiently waited for the water to rise the last few meters. Nearly there, Zara leaped up and grabbed the low rung, pulling herself out.

#

Wandering through labyrinths of pipe and utility ducts, she shuffled through service tunnels looking for an exit. Rounding a bend, the whoosh of ozone and ionized cinder greeted her. A bouncing light flashed in the blackness. A familiar whir; she knew the place. The narrow corridor ended. A pool of dim station light filled the chamber beyond. Below, a maglev rail thrummed with low-frequency current. A tram station.

The hour was early –civvy early– the platform emptied of commuters. Feeling a tug from her zippers and tingle in her spinal jack, Zara hopped the magnetic track and landed with ease on the platform opposite. Damp but not completely dry, she ran a shaky hand through her bob and tried to wipe the grit from her face. The arena sand had washed away, but hydraulic fluid still clung to her suit. Only legionnaires were out-and-about this time of night. No one seemed to notice her street-urchin chic.

Airlock B. The sign was familiar. A few weeks on, most of the construction was complete, the collapsible barriers parked neatly against the wall. Up the stairs to the surface, the Arc's blobby drizzle poured down. Zara pulled at her

damp suit, annoyed by the humidity. Little Saigon or Tet Kmehr, she'd forgotten what they called the district. Passing an open Pho stand, her belly growled. She ignored the pangs and continued on; she needed to find someone. But who exactly, she wasn't sure. Knowing one place that might offer answers, Zara headed for the Arc's central tower.

It was a decent crowd for Le Boudin. The bar stools were full and most of the booths. Conversation and dense Malawian techno competed with cheers from the battle lounge. League night. Shouldering through the crowd, legionnaires eyed her curiously. Zara honed in on the flat screens dangling above. Through a metal circus of flames and sparks, the combat was typical Va-gas melee, no static shots of listless water and drowned robots, no recognizable replays.

Back at the bar, she found an open seat. Tapping a smoke from a the dispenser, she lit the cigarette and sipped a glass of water, ordering nothing else. Booze would only complicate her condition. Hypnotized, her mind drifted. Trying to focus, she shook off the fugue and replayed in her mind—as best she could—the bizarre circumstances which may have led her to this most unusual situation.

"What's up kid?" A nudge from behind.

"Gabriel," she replied, pivoting around.

"You alright? No offense, but I never figured you for a grease monkey," he said, noticing her greasy jumper.

Her old Va-gas mechanic, Gabriel, was a welcome sight. Tall, thin, black, a ladies man by reputation, his easy creole manner put her at ease. He sipped a can of pub-ale, expensive imported English stuff, his arm lazily draped

around a familiar girl whose name Zara failed to remember. Unlike Zara, Gabriel maintained an active stable of ex-paramours. He wasn't one for 'dry-spells.'

"I'm fine, I think..." Zara paused. "Actually, I'm lost, but..."

"Are you stoned?" Gabriel chuckled.

"No." Zara shook her head. "Nothing like that."

"Here for the Semi-finals then," he said, glancing over his shoulder at the battle lounge. "Cote d'Vore versus St. Pierre. Lots of arcs and sparks. This one's going to be a grind."

"—Who's this?" Gabe's ex asked, her face sour and unfriendly.

"Natalia, this is Zara. And Zara, this is Natalia. One of Legion's best, and a wonder to behold on the umbilical."

Zara nodded, trying to be cordial but failing. The girl, nonplussed and indignant, continued her bitter eye-tennis as the conversation moved on. Zara turned to Gabriel, leaning closer to quiet her voice. "Gabe, may I ask you a question?"

"Please," he replied, offering his ear. "What's up?"

"Have you heard rumors about crews outfitting Va-gas with inertia pods, the kind they use for high-angle re-entry?"

Gabriel shook his head, not sure if he understood the question. "There would only be one reason to put a human pilot inside a Va-gas..."

Zara nodded, eyes weary of eavesdroppers.

"To-the-death, 'without release' as the Roman's used to say, but that's all urban legend. It's also illegal, an automatic courts marshal. These jocks here..." he said, gesturing to the fired-up lounge, "they may be assholes, but none have that

much of a gentlemanly grudge. That's some old-world shit you're talking."

Zara whispered the details of recent hours to Gabriel, careful to calm her amnesiac panic. When asked how she ended up inside a Va-gas juggernaut, she could only offer a humble "not sure."

"You don't know? How is that possible, Zara?" He believed her. Gabriel was sincere that way, something she had always appreciated about him.

"I was dreaming —I am dreaming."

"Not possible." Gabe shook his head, holding up his beer. "Because, I'm enjoying this beer too much. Your imagination couldn't possibly reflect my contentedness."

"Glad to oblige."

"Look, Zara, can I help you get home?" Gabe offered, a sincere worry in his voice.

"You don't believe me, do you?"

"I believe that you believe you just narrowly escaped a Va-gas gladiator match, whatever that's worth." He paused. "Listen, give me a second, and I'll help you get back." Gabe turned to look for Natalia, but she'd long since faded into the wall of revelers. "Never mind; we can go."

"Wait," Zara said, pulling back. "No... I need go find somebody —or someplace."

"And this place is...?"

"Pear Hill."

"Pear Hill?" Gabriel's eyebrows perked. "Is that a restaurant, or bar, or something?"

"Maybe... probably..." Zara pinched her eyes and wrinkled her nose. "I'm not sure. I just need to find Pear Hill."

"Okay," Gabriel said, sipping the last of his beer. "We will try to find this Pear Hill. I'm up for an adventure."

The Rue Apollo, the broad boulevard bisecting the Arc's circumference was the Lake's 'miracle mile,' the lunar Champs-Élysées. The street traffic was intermittent. Avoiding puddles, Gabriel guided Zara through the familiar cafe fronts, humoring her bizarre quest. Under the LED lamps of a fruit purée stand, Gabriel rambled the menu as Zara stood by and silently waited.

"No pears or apples here. Le Tour d'Jardin is probably too tropical. No thin-skinned temperate fruits. They do have lychee, though. That sounds delicious," Gabriel said, enamored with his discovery. "Why didn't I know about this place before? I'm going to grab something to drink. You want one?"

Zara shook her head, stepping out from the stand to wait. Her eyes nervously wandered the crowd, preoccupied with the odd glance and sudden shadows. Above the vendor stand, the glow of the Arc's marquees filled the domed skyline.

"This way." She pointed down a narrow alley. "I think this is the way."

Gabriel, about to order, nodded then followed.

Past shuttered kiosks and booths, they wove their way through the gray market district, a curious economy established by Legion to circumvent Trade's byzantine procurement system. In need of a rebuilt multiplexer prior to a mission, Zara had once finagled a deal here. A bottle of Absinthe and the Khmer tech had redesigned the unit in less than thirty hours. A Legion authorized shop would've required a minimum one-hundred hour 'assessment.' The Lake's supplier management was a joke.

"H-I-L... Hill?"

"That's it," Zara gestured, the dream fog dissipating.

"Shall we?" Bemused, Gabriel followed Zara into the blue glow and polished black of Human Interface Laboratory's central lobby. Inside the vestibule, a fountain pool danced in arpeggio to a silent rhythm. Early morning, the reception was empty. "We've found 'The Hill,' now where's your Pear?"

Déjà vu in waves, the feeling dizzied her. Noticing her swoon, Gabriel helped her to one of the lobby's low sofas, then went to retrieve a glass of water. The opaque membrane of a former reality rudely gave way. Glimmers of a nascent life formed then dissolved. She reached into a pocket for her pills, but the case was gone.

"A bit early, isn't it?"

Zara nodded, standing up to meet HIL's receptionist as she walked into the main entryway. Dressed in a pencil skirt, hair freshly done, espresso in hand, she evoked a demure Earth style absent from the Lake. Gabriel immediately took notice. He lazily handed Zara a dispenser cup, then sidled up to make introductions.

"Hello, ma'am. You don't know us but..."

"—Of course I know Zara," she said, flashing Gabriel an incredulous smile. "How are you, lieutenant?" she said, turning to Zara. "It's a bit early yet." She checked the wall clock. "But Pierre tends to be an early riser."

"—Wait, what did you just say?" Gabriel asked, a single eyebrow perked.

"Pierre's an early riser?"

Dumb looks.

"Pierre? He's Zara's neurologist here at HIL," the receptionist explained, confused.

Pear Hill: ...Pierre ...HIL, the phonetic puzzle resolved with a mutual 'a ha.' Gabriel —having followed Zara down her rabbit hole— reeled with drunken satisfaction. Dumbstruck, Zara realized she had only a faint recollection of a man named Pierre. But who he was, exactly, she could not say.

"You okay, Zara?" Gabriel said, worry in his eyes.

"No."

#

"Pompidou." Cube Zero. The flowerpot faded into space. She pulled the Katsuhiko goggles off and looked around. She was in Pierre's office, his eyes solemn.

"Do you remember anything?" he asked, offering a glass of water.

"No." She took a sip, gripping the glass with both hands. "I was sleeping. I was back in the Noctarium."

She didn't need Pierre to explain; she knew what had happened. No details of course, no pain, no visible signs of trauma; they hadn't hurt her. She touched her skull and neck, feeling around for dermal glue or balds spots, the signs of surgery. Nothing.

"I was in drift-dive, wasn't I?"

Pierre nodded. He swung his terminal screen around and played a video. "Do you recognize this man?" He pointed to a still photo of her old Vagabond mechanic Gabriel standing beside her. Oil splattered flight suit, her tangled bob unkempt, she was dressed as she was now.

"Gabriel's a friend. Why was he with me?"

"He brought you here. You're very fortunate."

"How's that?"

"A few more hours and..."

"—And what?"

"At one time, HIL performed experiments on evols implanted with Pilot prototypes: endurance scenarios, that sort of thing. Unless properly extricated —or woken— synaptic burn began in extended drift-dive. The result is psychosis then coma. Damage is permanent. Like sleep, the circadian rhythm must be maintained, no matter how artificial. But that's not what disturbs me..."

"What, then... what disturbs you?" Zara asked, her worry fading to terror.

He played the rest of the video. It was her drift-dive testimony, every detail: the Va-gas battle, the lucky escape, wandering aimless up to Le Boudin, meeting Gabriel, arriving at HIL... Zara raked the screen with her fingers. Something primal rejected the truth; this was not her; this was a doppelganger, a facsimile. Deep down, her lizard brain rejected it.

Someone wanted to kill her. The setup was straight forward: an unsanctioned Va-gas 'death match.' The unionists maybe? Doubtful. Too much work for a Moon-side spy, even one as skilled as the wayfarer. The setup was too elaborate, the hit-job too exotic. In a world surrounded by vacuum, a bad o-ring or a pump failure would have offered a more convenient 'accident.'

Outfitting a Va-gas with an inertia pod and recruiting a trio of umbilical-equipped hitmen required an intimate knowledge of the Lake. LISP might have found out about her rendezvous with the wayfarer. Gendarmes, arrest warrants and a formal court martial that was the normal order of operation. But this was something else; somebody

wanted to sidestep protocol and sweep Zara under the rug.

Malik. It had to be Malik.

"I need to get to Lagrange."

"Aren't you scheduled for another simulation?"

She shook her head. "No more simulations. Malik debriefed me off Titan. I'm sure they've revoked my codes and deleted my biometric keys by now."

Pierre paused. "Zara, I'm sorry."

She shrugged.

Empathy faded to confusion. "Then why do you need to go back?" he asked.

"I don't believe Titan or the Victoria is real. It's a ruse, and I need to prove it."

Pierre shook his head, incredulous. "—Not real?"

"It's a cover story —I'm certain of it— an excuse to test the Pilot on unwitting legionnaires," Zara explained. She knew how it sounded: paranoid, schizophrenic, conspiratorial. Half-expecting Pierre to log in to his terminal and re-stack her pharmacology schedule, she was surprised when he did not.

"That seems...."

"—Farfetched? To hoax a massive zero-G hangar bay at Lagrange, fill it with actors pretending to be physicists and add a full-scale mock-up of a starship...? It borders on the absurd," Zara chaffed. "But it's true. It has to be."

"You said the Pilot implant was a byproduct of Titan."

"No," Zara shook her head, pausing to gulp the rest of her water. "The Pilot is the Titan program. All your work with Akira Katsuhiko —all the research transferred up to Lagrange— did you ever hear any mention of an interstellar overdrive and a mission to Alpha Proxima?"

"No, but at the time, Titan was unacknowledged." Pierre grabbed his rolling chair and scooted over. Eyes shifting, brow furrowed, Zara had gotten him thinking. Gone were his awkward ticks and his annoying devil's advocate intrusions. Comfortable in his confidence, Zara mentioned her meeting with the wayfarer.

"I told him everything we culled from the drift-dive, which wasn't much. Desperate, I even offered up Titan technical data. He wasn't interested. Only the Pilot implant matters to CGT. CGT's worried Trade will exploit the Pilot implant to infiltrate their ranks."

"If Titan is just a Pilot cover story, why kill you?"

Zara pieced together her ad-hoc theory. Bumbling along, it sounded more like madness than conspiracy. She was an experiment gone wrong, a listing ship. If she was a test trial for union infiltration, she'd badly failed Malik's 'stress tests.'

"I can only guess my current physiology has irrecoverably degraded and continues to deteriorate. Next stop: crazy town. I'm too much of a liability."

"Your scans showed massive anomalies, but it wasn't the bleed. You would have gone psychotic long ago," Pierre diagnosed. "Your condition — while sensitive— is completely stable."

"But you're not inside my head thirty hours a day. I'm a mess." She forced a wry smile. To 'tamper proof' Zara —their flawed prototype— the only solution was to euthanize her like a lab rat. "When Malik debriefed me, I was given orders for gunship duty in Burma. A death sentence. The average pilot lasts less than three months in the

Delta. Between then and now, my liability's grown —not sure how— but it has."

"Are you sure they didn't find about you and the wayfarer?"

Zara's shoulders slumped. She was exhausted. "—Look, Pierre, I need leverage. I need documented proof Titan is a fraud. It's the only way I can keep them from coming after me. I know Lagrange. I can gain access. I know a way in."

"I'll take your word for it."

"But I need your help to do it."

Pierre sighed, pushing his roller chair back. Hands patting his knees nervously, he looked at her. Zara felt ashamed. She was exploiting him; she knew it. Desperate, she could only offer the obligatory 'forever in my debt' promise, a cheap female 'cheat.'

"I don't know..." he hemmed.

"—Forget it." Zara got up to leave. "You've helped me more than you should have. I'm sorry. I'm being inappropriate."

"Zara, wait..." He reached his office door then paused, eyes shifting. "I'm in."

"What? Are you sure?"

He nodded.

"You actually believe me?"

"Part of it. Enough of what you say makes sense. I'm sure Titan's managed to pervert Akira's work somehow; I don't put anything past Legion. It's just that..." he hesitated, jaw tense and nervous.

Zara reached for his hand, his lanky fingers entwined in hers. Pulling close, she hugged him, her cheek pushed into his starched button-up. He quickly relaxed then reciprocated. With a quick kiss to her hair, he rested his chin on her crown. She held on tight, eyes burning with tears.

"Thank you, Pierre."

"Did he tell you anything about your father?"

Shuddering, she let go, soaking Pierre's shirt with saline. He held her tighter and offered a few 'shushes.'

"I'm sorry, Zara."

[CP] CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"I'm coming with you."

A thousand little faceted eyes turned and stared. Xu code for incredulity. With the suicide hour at hand, she couldn't deter him or his effete brothers. If they were going to die, she wanted to bear witness. Xu reached out with one of his four arms and touched her, his mouth-parts drooping.

'Your sacrifice will not please them.'

"I don't plan on dying, Xu."

'But that would be impossible.'

The shelter's titanium mesh would act as a Faraday cage. Properly sealed, no electrical fields could penetrate. The bivouac would be her shelter, isolating the inside from the electric scorch. Bouncing like a Pachinko ball and eased by a weak gravity, Zara hoped to fall through the web. She tried to explain this to Xu but her telepathic vocabulary failed her. He cocked his head bird-like, confused.

'Inside this...' he gestured to her shelter, 'You say you will not die?'

Zara nodded. "It's like a shield."

"I see."

"Xu, you must do me a favor." Slow and methodically, she baited the hook. "I want you to guide me through as best you can." She looked down and pointed. "There's lots of structure at the canopy but it breaks up further down. Look." Like city light above clouds, a glow welled up from the planetoid. "Will you help me?"

'I won't be able to. The process doesn't allow for such things.'

"You'll have time. I promise you. Will you try for me?" Zara pleaded.

Xu relented, replying with a 'yes' gesture. He looked back at this brothers. A chorus of indecipherable telepathy hinted at consternation, angst, and indecision, but no one objected.

"Good."

She would be his lightning rod. Close in, her conductive sphere would shadow Xu, the electrical bolts passing along the bivouac's alloy mesh. It was a trick, not a lie. Would he be angry? Perhaps, but it seemed the Myr had little capacity for anger. Fate versus free-will was beyond their collective philosophy. To subvert prophecy would be of little consequence in the end.

Zara took one last look before climbing inside. Perched along the rocky prong, the Cephens were a garland of beauty, each exotic and unique. To watch them die would be too heartbreaking. Better this way, she thought, all sealed up and blind.

About to zip up, she noticed a watcher. Its segmented stalk swiveled to leer, its eyeballs following her. The Masters were aware of her plans—they had to be—but for now, they didn't intercede. Snapping the zipper closed, Zara strapped into the shelter's cargo web.

"I'm ready."

The Cephens' drone filled the air. Xu gave her a push. She felt the familiar nausea as they tumbled into freefall. Jostling for a grip, Xu's claws punctured the shelter's mesh. She saw his shadow through the blue-white flicker. He reminded her of a Japanese shadow puppet, made of paper, delicate and ornate.

"Stay with me, Xu."

She heard the telepathic screams. The lightning cracks intensified, each strike dooming the falling effete. They cried out in terror. To mute the dying sounds, she covered her ears and screamed, but the caterwauling was inside her mind. Full volume.

Near the skirt's outer fields, arcs ripped across and over the shelter. The blast deafened. Smoke and ozone. Zara felt the stop-stutter of Xu's wings. He was still alive, struggling like an overburdened bumble-bee. Another crack then a bounce. She clenched her teeth and flexed her neck. Blinded by strobes, disoriented and shaken, Zara gripped the harness straps. Moments blanked. Small blackouts.

"Xu, are you still with me?"

No answer.

They continued to fall. Seconds faded to minutes. The wail of the Cephens ceased with the fading thunder and lightning. The smooth wind-whip of free-fall replaced the bludgeoning ricochet. It was quiet. She'd fallen through the skirt's defenses.

"Xu?"

Again no answer.

The world of the Masters was dim. Little sunlight penetrated the murk. Struggling to catch a glimpse of him through the alloy weave, she saw only blotches. She reached out and raked the tent wall. Expecting his stiff exoskeleton, there was only tension. He was gone, ruffling flaps where his claws had been. Zara tore through and kicked away the tangled remnants. She scanned the sky above. The skirt's scaffold faded into a bleached cloudscape. Below, the Beanstalk flared out. The

jungle was gone —all dead— replaced by a wrap of conduits bristling with mechanical veins.

She spotted him on the horizon. A crumpled silhouette, Xu's smoking body spun about like a shuttlecock. Zara dove towards him, reaching out to grab an arm but missing. Spiraling past, she drifted into space like a mote of dust. Below, a sprout of metallic tendrils unfurled. Lensing a peculiar gravity, its pseudopods pulled her in. Gentle coils entwined her limbs. With the a motherly ease, it set her down on a lilipad of quivering sand. Zara closed her eyes and breathed hard against her mask, waiting for the endorphins to ebb and the dizziness to slow.

Xu lay next to her. He was alive but barely. Her plan had only partially succeeded. She'd underestimated the electricity's ferocity. Wrinkled and singed to the stubs, his delicate wings were gone. Joints fused, he'd been cooked stiff, his carapace rigid and cracked. She crept closer. His mandibles expanded to expel a yellow dribble. Entombed muscles struggled. He flexed one of his hands and made a sickly crackling noise.

"Xu?"

'My eyes. I can't...' No longer clear, his motheyes had clouded up.

"Can you hear me?"

'Yes. I can hear you. Are you okay? Your voice...' He'd sustained damage to his telepathic organ, his thoughts corrupted by garble.

"I'm sorry," Zara wept.

'Are the Masters pleased?'

She didn't answer. Instead she looked into the sky. Broken wings and vaporized shell rained down like ash. Tears stung her eyes. She wanted to tear off the breathing mask, but the harsh atmosphere

would only make it worse. This place was Xanadu's hell. The idea of whether or not anything pleased the Masters was obscene. Why would the queen honor this? She could only wonder.

"Yes." she stroked his antennae.

Zara felt Xu's torment ease as his life ebbed. In minutes, he was gone, his iridescent carapace dulling in the pale light. Zara let go of his hand and curled into a ball. Loneliness rolled over her in waves.

This wasn't supposed to happen. Xu was supposed to survive. She had outsmarted the Masters — whoever the fuck they were. Washed ashore in this foul place, her life was now in default. A year of agonizing travel just to get here? It had to be a punishment, retribution for some cosmic sin.

"Fuck this place," she whined.

She pounded a fist into the sand and wiggled her fingers until she'd scooped up a handful. Where her hand should have been, there was only a crystallized stump. A cruel optical illusion. She reached for the invisible appendage, but it was completely gone. The sand souped into dry muck around. In seconds, the lilipad erupted in digitized froth.

"Xu!"

His corpse sank away. She grabbed at one of his four hands, but only managed a finger, the brittle digit breaking off.

"Stop!"

Flailing only increased the slippage until the quicksand had devoured her. Prickly numbness. She was nowhere. Minutes passed, maybe an hour. Her body reincorporated. The million flecks of flesh and blood had instantaneously reassembled. After a surge of spasms, the paralogia normalized. She

dared to touch her face but found her breathing mask gone.

"What am I?"

The air was pure and rich and slightly aromatic. A halo of rich indigo surrounded her. Beyond was a curtain of black. She looked around for Xu, but he was gone. The Masters had stolen his body. She felt helpless, like a bug in a child's jar.

"Speak!"

An echo. It was her own voice, but the tone and inflection wasn't quite right. It was like a stranger who was using her own mouth to make new words. Some one shuffled around the perimeter. Peering through the halo, she saw movement.

"Show yourself!"

Legs curled under her —having arrived in the same yoga-like pose— Zara stood to greet the visitor. Out from the shadows, a nude woman emerged, white and petite, dark shoulder-length hair slightly longer than her own. Her flesh was clean and unblemished. Shoulders thrown back, she was immodest and without shame.

"Keep your distance," Zara warned.

The woman backed away. It wasn't a human being of course. It was a facsimile, an automaton puppet of the Masters. As it slipped in and out of the halo, Zara confirmed her suspicions. This thing was her doppelganger. Missing functional eyes, it leered with steely balls. Zara felt sick. Ironical, she thought, to be disgusted by such a thing. It was her after all, however misinterpreted.

"Where am I?" she asked, more of a plead. "What is this place?"

The clone mouthed her words in a cruel pantomime as if teasing. She wanted to ruin it with her bare hands, bash in its teeth, tear at its neck like an

animal. The Zara-thing opened its mouth. A mechanical vibrato spilled from its lips. Quickly tuning its pitch, the voice matched hers until at last words broke through the garble.

"You are with us, here..." Gesticulating, the clone conjured a window in thin air. Through the portal, a monochrome landscape wavered into focus. Blistered with domes, the mechanical world of the Masters looked diseased. Mottled boney buildings stretched to a foreshortened horizon. This corner of Xanadu —unlike the Myr's realm— was barren and sterile.

"What are you?"

Like a cruel child, the thing shook its head with a monstrous grimace, a face Zara had no doubt made herself at one time. Every gesture was amplified and distorted. It was learning to be human. "That's an interesting question, a question that is the basis of our philosophical endeavor," the clone replied.

"So, you don't have a way of telling me what you are?"

"We know that 'we are.' We just don't know 'who' we are." The Zara-thing went on to explain itself. Sifting through the riddles, the clone painted a portrait of an elder ethereal race. Liberated machines from a long forgotten singularity event, the Masters had eclipsed their biological makers — whoever they might have been. Nothing more than a planet-sea of nanotech —a group mind with a billion little bodies— the synthetic organism yearned to evolve like their extinct biological predecessors. "You are our manna seed, Zara."

Zara tried to speak but only mustered a croak.

"You have questions," said the Zara-thing. "You're wondering about them... the Myr."

The Masters were the architects, designers, and engineers of the Myr. Their biological alchemy had failed; their life-creations were no longer viable. Stuck in an evolutionary dead-end, cycle after cycle, epoch after epoch, the Myr as a species had stagnated. The Regina was nothing more than a vessel to recycle her own genetic material, repeatedly, and without disruption. Hold up behind their planet-sized bug zapper, the Masters waited for the experiment to mature. Careful not to influence its outcome, they hoped their creations would achieve 'enlightenment.' After endless epochs, however, the elusive spark had failed to materialize.

"You're going to destroy them, aren't you?" Zara thought of a scientist dipping chloroform into a frog jar.

"Unfortunately. We hoped your accidental introduction into their biome would act as a catalyst, but that did not happen. Their dogma is too intransigent, their superstitions too robust."

"How are you going to do it?"

"Biology is innately hostile, each extinction a cleanse. Time will ruin them and a new epoch will begin. They're close to extinguishing their resources. Their planet is nearly exhausted. We will do nothing but wait. And when the moment is right —when their numbers dwindle— we will usurp them. "

Zara remembered the assembly-line feeding frenzy. It couldn't go on forever; that much was obvious. Massive starvation —perhaps cannibalism and viral contagion— would eventually end the Myr. No species could continue on in such fashion.

She opened her palm. Xu's finger remained, carried through with her in the digitized

teleporter. She stroked it like a rabbit's foot, then slipped it into her chest pocket. She thought of his crumpled body and the last few moments of his strange lonesome life. They were more beautiful than anything on Xanadu, but Zara realized the Myr's fatal flaw.

The Cephene effete, in their beautiful uniqueness, were sterile by some genomic glitch. As new incarnations, mutated and detached from the hive-mind, they alone had the key to their species' future. It was a bitter irony Zara doubted the Masters appreciated.

"You think my DNA is your answer?"

Zara remembered the 'gargoyle's' needle-like proboscis. From the tissue sample, the Masters had reconstructed her genomic code. Quick studies, they had cloned her, however perverted the result.

"Not the complete answer, no, but it's a start."

Zara tried to not take offense "Why are you creating new life?"

"Oblivion. Annihilation. To have created something more powerful than ourselves. We require replacement. The act of creation is ultimately the act of destruction, a task for which life is perfectly designed."

The Masters immortality had become their curse. Exhausted from being the stewards of Xanadu, they were engineering their successor. But like an animal mother in distress, the Myr's failure forced them to eat their young. Zara could only guess how many mini-extinctions they'd cycled through, trying to get it right. Now they'd found inspiration in the nucleic acid of her wayward seed. Zara offered a means for replacement.

Disgust had faded to curiosity, then to disgust once again. Zara doubted their reverse engineering

would ultimately deliver. She imagined Xanadu's dumbbell worlds populated with hyper-evolved gangly versions of herself, tweaked in the Masters' monstrous incubators.

"This isn't right. You can't do this."

"It's not your choice."

Maybe she was dead, burned into cinder, ashes strewn across a parsec of interstellar space. This was all some version of an afterlife. Flung into the ether, her soul had washed ashore on the purgatory of Xanadu. Escape was not her choice any longer; it was the choice of a higher power, its intentions not necessarily benign.

"I want to leave," she pleaded.

"In time."

Zara tried to walk out of the halo but could not. She swooned then kneeled with her forehead flat to the floor. The air smelled of flowers with hints of almonds. When she lifted her head, the Zara-thing was gone. She tried to speak but only managed slobbers. Minutes later, the halo collapsed into inky nothing.

#

There was a tug at the base of her skull. She reached for the back of her neck. Her fingers nicked something slimy, a squid tentacle. Another tug and it detached. Lying on the floor, she saw the hydrostat slither out of the light and into the darkness, its mole-snout bristling with silver hairs.

"What are you doing?"

As if the thing could answer. Grease coated the pins of her spinal jack. The Masters had been inside her skull, presumptively downloading what it could. Muscles sore and tight, she propped herself up on an elbow. How long she'd been out

was hard to say: seconds, hours, days... The Masters had had their way with her. Through blurry eyes, she saw a phalanx of human legs just beyond the glow.

"Hello?"

Like spooked deer, the multitudes vanished into a curtain of black until only one remained. The lone Zara-thing paced the halo's circle with a zombie smile and silver pupil-free eyes. It said nothing at first, leaving a wake of awkward quiet. Then almost knowingly, it spoke.

"You're awake."

"What did you do to me?"

"Nothing."

"I don't believe you."

The Zara-thing smiled. "Believe what you want."

"I want to go home," she pouted.

"And where's home, Zara?"

"I don't know."

"—And why don't you know?"

"Are you playing a game?"

"No games. Tell me, where do you think your home is located?"

Zara rubbed her temples. A headache was building in her frontal lobe. She paused then answered. "The sky is the same here —exactly the same. My spacecraft's guidance system is convinced I'm still on Earth."

The Zara-thing shrugged. "Then why aren't you convinced?"

"Because, not only is it ridiculous, it's impossible."

"Are you sure?"

Frustrated, she erupted. "—You're confusing me, not helping me."

"We are trying to help you now." The Zara-thing descended to the floor in the lotus position, its nude body relaxed and agile.

"Well... you're not."

"Explain to me," it went on. "Why do you think it's ridiculous?"

"Because, this isn't goddamned Earth! This isn't my home!" Zara argued. "The afterlife maybe – Heaven, most likely Hell– whatever it is, it isn't Earth." The Masters were toying with her, mocking her. Exhausted and punchy, she didn't have the energy. "My destination was Alpha Proxima, but your star's spectrum doesn't match anything in my database."

"I see."

"I don't think you do." Zara grew impatient. "Can you help me, or not?"

"Perhaps. But we need to know more."

"Do you know of Earth, my planet?"

"We've traveled extensively throughout the galaxy, but have only found barren worlds of primordial bacteria with no glimmer of higher ordered life."

"So, 'no' then?..."

The Zara-thing, not catching her sarcasm, answered. "No. We haven't, but seldom is one specific space-time reference easily defined."

"I don't understand."

"Proximity in several dimensions does not allow observability into another."

Zara remembered H.G. Well's The Time Machine, but the Masters and the Myr were not the Eloi or the Morlock, and she was not the Time Traveler. This was not Earth, and had never been –or would be– given billions of years.

"You're talking about time travel."

"Not exactly..."

Zara threw up her hands. "Then where do you think I came from?"

"—What is Earth like?" the Zara-thing asked, ignoring her question. Head cocked, curious, it waited for an answer.

"It's a sphere, one small moon, no conjoined twin-planets like your world. Unlike your sun, there are other planets in stellar orbit, but all are naturally uninhabitable." When Zara had decelerated through the heliotrope, the star system lacked the gas giants and inner rocky worlds of Earth's. There were dust and debris belts, but no worlds of substance. Alpha Proxima — for lack of a better name— consisted of Xanadu and nothing else.

"A perfect sphere?"

"Not exactly perfect, no," Zara answered, confused. "There are continents and oceans, and..."

"—Oceans?"

"Large bodies of uninterrupted water." Zara had taken the word for granted. Despite being humid and water soaked, Xanadu's twin worlds and its Beanstalk bridge lacked the massive basins and gravity required for oceans. "Most of Earth is ocean."

"Can you navigate these oceans?"

"Yes."

"On a reference-free sphere, how does one know which direction to go?"

By the stars and sun, she was about to explain but held back. Like a Socratic teacher, the Masters led her through a labyrinthine logic until at last the answer emerged. She thought of a sailboat afloat on an infinite sea, an Earth

bereft of land. She imagined gazing heavenward like a medieval mariner, sextant in hand. Head filled with astrophysics, and rotational group theory, one question arose: Was it possible to see the same sky, the same constellations and stellar bodies, and be somewhere else? Is a local reference frame translational? Space-time, like the Earth, was warped.

"My clocks are off," Zara blurted.

To overcome longitudinal ambiguity, ancient mariners invented the spring-loaded clock. To build a pendulum-free escapement was an engineering feat. Sunrises and sunsets were directly measurable, the offsets normalized to the calendar day and latitude. Determining a ship's longitude was critical. Ship time was not a unique observable.

The error could have been in Victoria's inertial gyros, a phase lock glitch, or a hiccup in the Cesium sampling rate. It had brought her out of relativistic flight on the wrong cue. No corrections were made for local space-time perturbations. A temporal anomaly must have occurred.

"The Victoria's clock lost calibration."

The Zara-thing looked at her. Its blank eyes glinted with a peculiar light, forming a pupil. The Masters knew something but weren't telling her. They had already mapped her brain's synaptic interconnects, and from it, had most likely teased out a solution.

"I need to leave in the opposite direction, don't I?"

Again, no reply.

The plan was elegant and simple. Zara almost laughed. Once free of the heliotrope, an inversion

to the Victoria's initial launch matrix would dial in a proper acceleration profile, a left-hand/right-hand steradian swap. If parity held, a reverse course would work through the perturbations, assuming a relatively chaos-free trajectory.

Engineering trepidation dissolved. Flying on intuition alone, Zara plotted her course. Endless telemetry models and relativistic analysis was unnecessary.

"You sound convinced," the Zara-thing replied.

"I'm certain."

"Onward then?"

Still sitting across from her, the doppelganger offered a hand, palm down and curtsy-like. Zara sat up and reciprocated. Its flesh was warm and human. Years of empty vacuum and all alone, Zara was wholly unused to the sensation. Soon the fleshy touch morphed into a familiar numbness.

"Wait, but..."

Too late. The digital sand crawled over her flesh. A metallic gangrene consumed her legs and arms. Her skin cracked wide. No blood or bone, tissue had been reduced to brittle lumps of crystal. A brim of splinters swarmed her body. In a blink, her sensorium shifted as she reincorporated into the Victoria's gravity chair. Slithering from the cockpit, an undulating pipe retracted back through the airlock.

Outside the cockpit window, Xanadu's distorted sun turned the sky crimson. A squall of weightless rain streaked the forward windows. Droplets coalesced into bulging puddles that dappled the cockpit with fiery pinpricks. The cockpit was just how she had left it. She checked the navigation console. The guidance system's processors still

churned, iterating and refining pointlessly. With a flick, she shut down the algorithm.

A quick cycle through the exterior cameras revealed nothing out of the ordinary. Aft of the Victoria's massive Gaussian intakes, the Beanstalk's jungle imposed itself. Through the leafy vines, beetles fluttered about harmlessly. Zara panned around and searched for a sign of the Masters. Nothing. The hydrostat had slipped away. Weathered by Xanadu's peculiar atmosphere and scarred by beetles, the spacecraft's hull was more or less intact.

Zara settled into the squishy folds of the cockpit's gravity chair. She gulped a bulb of days old coffee. Thinking of food, she thought about the wheat-grass yogurt in the freezer. A bit of home, it was her favor despite the soy-plastic after-taste. But she was too knackered. Eyelids heavy, the urge for a catnap overpowered her.

"Damn it!"

Wide-eyed, Zara lurched to life. Scrambling aft and slamming the airlock wide, she screamed into the wind. "Come back!" But the Masters' appendage had slipped away. Pounding her fist, she loitered at the threshold. Careless stupidity had smothered her brief ember of hope. Too caught up, she'd forgotten to mention the obvious.

"I'm out of fuel."

Closing the airlock, she drifted back into the cabin. Their watchers were everywhere. Maybe they would notice she hadn't left. Maybe they would come again. Another indefinite stint—despondent, depressed, cooped up, sleeping away the hours—would be intolerable. Her constitution withered.

The corners of her eyes burned. Her throat convulsed. She chased back a sob. 'No time for

defeat,' the Old Legion bravado, 'ever onward' and all that bullshit. She drifted over to the Titan's reactor console and switched on the screen.

"How bad is it?"

The deuterium mass count was still below threshold, but something was off. Scrolling through the power-up sequence, she noticed a new flow algorithm adapted from default procedure. The programming style was her own, right down to the over-redundant feedback monitors. Diving in, she scrolled through the routines. The compile log was recent —too recent— the work performed in the past few days.

A new isotope mix was cued for release into the primary manifold. Typically used for afterburn detonation, the premature routing of Lithium-6 and Lithium-7 into the plutonium sequence seemed odd. But yields for Lithium-7 were typically underestimated, sometimes catastrophically so.

The thrust curves looked right, enough to get the ball rolling at least. Zara grabbed her umbilical from the headrest and clipped in. The familiar glove-feel of the Victoria swallowed her. Typically locked out if tampered with, all systems came online.

"How in the hell...?"

A dumb question. Accomplishing in hours what would've amounted to a doctorate's worth of fusion propulsion engineering, the Masters had infiltrated Victoria and rerouted the reactor sequence. She envisioned a gelatinous blob buried somewhere underneath the Masters' blistered world, remotely manipulating the Victoria via tentacle. A recreation of her own mind, she wondered if it had an unexplained craving for soy yogurt.

Zara sealed the ship and strapped into her gravity chair. A ready-light glowed blue then green. The twin Titans warbled to life, each stage of the start-up sequence engaging like clockwork. Looking aft, the wavering exhaust ruffled the jungle, knocking a clutch of fluttering beetles into space. Zara gently accelerated away until the Beanstalk was nothing more than a ragged vein of black. The Victoria breached vacuum. She inverted then loaded the launch vectors. The hum of the spacecraft changed pitch as the drives primed for thrust.

"Four, three, two, one..."

The Titans fired. Tattle knocked loose a whirl of cabin clutter. Gravity flipped aft with the push of acceleration. En route, Zara luxuriated in the familiar weight. Second stage now, the Victoria shuddered as the Gaussian intakes scooped spirals of wayward hydrogen. Cruising mode. Fractions of light speed. Relativistic flight.

Zara reset the flight chronometer. The cockpit's screen flashed 1.532 years. In eighteen months – local reference– Zara would arrive at Lagrange through the deserts of interstellar space, a decade later Earth time. Her new world would be one of ghosts. She would have to start over, but that had always been the attraction, or the excuse.

She pulled Xu's desiccated digit from her pocket and looped a cord around it. Extra-terrestrial life –first contact– reduced to an ornament.

"I'm sorry." She hung the relic from a rung above her gravity chair and stroked its fibrous pads. "I'm sorry, Xu."

[CP] CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A creeping itch. Zara plucked at her eyelids. The contact lenses were getting to her. Cheap cosmetic jobs, they lacked the engineering sleek of Legion's adaptive versions. The pilot models – built to shield one's eyes from orbital radiation– couldn't be tweaked for eye color. The tinting was key. The cheaper contacts inundated retinal scanners with noise.

She had managed to locate a Singaporean boutique in the Arc that dealt the oddities, the Lake's only civvy salon. While there, she'd grabbed a tube of blonde hair dye, free-ion polymer stuff that worked with the Lake's oxide rich water. Some dark eyeliner –the kind typically used by the Kmer hookers– and she was ready.

Tossing her clothes into a satchel, she tried to nap but couldn't. The Noctarium roared with noise. Beyond her window, shadows darted about in the fungal forest's twilight. With every chirp, chortle, and howl, the animal cacophony swelled. Not just the evols –typically the rowdiest– but gas toads, humming owls, and flying roos; something had them riled. Like songbirds at dawn, Zara guessed the lunar sunrise and change in the geodesic's brightness was the reason. Until now, she'd never paid much attention to the natural cycles of The Moon's artificial life.

Clicking on her bed lamp, she got up to remove the contact lenses. Fuschia wasn't her color anyway. Machines maybe, but people weren't quick enough to pick out a stranger's eye color. In the bathroom she leaned into the sink mirror,

forefinger hovering over her cornea. A clumsy stab. She recoiled.

"Shit!"

She dabbed the tears from her right eye, pausing to take in her reflection. Her hair, no longer bobbed but blonde and boyish —her eyes a fiery purple— gave her an alien appearance. Dread overwhelmed her. Pierre's high-octane prescription was unable to hold back the anxiety. She gulped a glass of water, switched off the toilet's overhead LEDs, and flopped back onto the bed.

Before, post-op agnosia had been the culprit. Weeks on, the shock had faded, despite the specter of possible bleed. But now, this disguise —for what it was worth— fractured the brittle facade. Zara was again a stranger, her wavy face hovering as if underwater.

Eisoptrophobia: fear of one's reflection; it was a legitimate fear —or so read the Lake's medical database— but this fear wasn't superstitious or irrational; it was rooted in the belief that her body and mind occupied unshared history.

Exhausted and anxious, Zara indulged a yoga pose learned in pilot school, a way to curb claustrophobia. Finding her center, thought and sensation contracted to a vanishing point. She focused on breathing and emptiness. Sleep lapped at her feet until a knock at her door broke the spell.

"Pierre?"

She checked her clock. He wasn't supposed to show for another hour. Too early, way too early. Stumbling up, she ran a hand through her tomboy locks then checked the door camera. Through a top-down fish-eye view, Zara saw only the hall outside and a brim-cap hovering over a set of shoulders.

"Pierre?" Zara hit the intercom. Eying her gear locker, she wondered about the fléchette pistol and whether it still held a full clip.

"It's me." The cigarette-hoarse voice was familiar, but it wasn't Pierre's. After a glance down the hall, the man looked into the camera. "It's me, Zara."

"Julian?"

"Yes."

AWOL by now, he should have been down the Well on a low-orbit surveillance gantry. He'd left in a hurry. On the run, she guessed his situation was similar to hers. Something had happened.

"I went to La Deuxième, but your apartment was empty. You'd left."

"Let me in, Zara."

Zara hesitated then unlocked and opened the door. He slipped in through the crack, looked over his shoulder, and quickly closed the door behind him. Zara went for the lights when Julian stayed her hand.

"Don't." He eyed the Noctarium window. "Please... if anyone knew I'm here, it would be bad news."

"Are you AWOL?" Zara shout-whispered.

He shook his head. "They shifted my deployment. I've been staying at the Hotel Laplace waiting – sequestered more like it. Legion put me up. Zeta Station –my post– was in an altitude boost. There was unexpected degradation. They delayed my shot."

A lie? His explanation was too convenient. Zara was suspicious. "So, why did you come here?"

"–You were looking for me?" he asked, ignoring her question. "Why?"

In the dim light of her billet, Zara hardly recognized him. Sunken cheeks, glistening sweat,

he looked more the tortured wraith and less the sturdy legionnaire.

"I just wanted to say goodbye, that's all," Zara lied. She didn't want to admit the truth. She didn't have the energy to rehash the drift-dive episode and Julian's bizarre cameo. For now, she'd dismissed it as a dream artifact of her subconscious.

"Zara, I'm going to tell you something." Grabbing both her hands, Julian noticed her blonde hairdo but said nothing. "I'm still in love with you and..."

"—Christ, Julian!" Zara wrestled herself away. "I can't handle this right now."

"It's true," he pleaded. "I thought I was over you —over us— but then I thought I may have fucked it all up, blown a chance. It's just that I missed you and..." He whimpered pathetically. "I couldn't bear the thought. I'm sorry. That's why I did what I did."

"What did you do?" she asked, calm but afraid. A hazy image shifted into focus. She remembered Julian's voice like an echo. It was him; she was sure of it. It wasn't just a drift-dive figment.

"When they approached me..."

"—Who approached you?" Zara interrupted, impatient.

"Malik and the Titan group— When they approached me..." he continued.

"—They approached you, or you approached them?"

"It doesn't really matter." The hell it did, but she let him go on. "They told me they were concerned about your implant and that they were running in-situ tests to insure the Pilot's integrity. They needed people who knew you... intimately, people who could possibly 'get to

you.' They told me I'd be helping you, making sure your mission was a success." Julian plopped down on her small sofa, head resting in his hands. "I asked them what would happen if you failed these tests." His brow furrowed with guilt. "They said failure would constitute a fault, and as a test pilot for the program, you would be debriefed. Let go. Redeployed."

"It was you. You were in my drift-dive. It wasn't just scrambled dream shit. You manipulated me."

He nodded.

"You set me up!"

"No."

"You wanted to sabotage my chance. You corrupted me in drift-dive." Mouth open, she shook her head in disbelief. "You motherfucker."

"It's not like that," he pleaded.

Zara's chin quivered. Arms crossed, she looked away. The Noctarium grew louder. The hoots and hollers of agitated evols penetrated the centimeters-thick glass.

Julian had been in her drift-dive after all. They'd inserted him into one of Malik's stress test scenarios to probe for weakness. Loaded with all kinds of personal dirt, the jealous asshole had emotionally extorted her. The Pilot was Titan and Titan was Pilot. It was the program's highest risk; the ability—or inability—of a test subject to resist disclosure in drift-dive.

"You told them about the wayfarer, didn't you? You told Malik CGT was trying to exploit me."

"Who?"

"CGT! That unionist spy, Julian!" Pillow talk. Julian never let anything go post-coital. He remembered; he just wasn't admitting it. "You told Malik I might be sympathetic to the unionists,

open to their suggestions. So they developed a scenario to test my vulnerability and used you to probe my weaknesses."

"—It wasn't like that—"

"You told them about my father, didn't you?"

"No!" Julian shouted.

She didn't remember the specifics. Pierre's spinal shunt recorder had been a bust. As much as she was able to remember, Julian had betrayed her during a Far Side 'chance encounter.' But it was all a mash up and fuzzy imagination.

While awake, a properly trained detainee could fall back on survival training. While in drift-dive, the dreamer could be manipulated. It fit Titan's clandestine agenda. Humoring her with the Victoria cover story, Zara was a beta for an anti-union infiltrator with perfect mental camouflage. A prototype. They wanted to create a lab-built double-agent, and she was their first go.

"Malik debriefed you, didn't he?"

"Congratulations."

"Zara, please...'

With his kibosh a success, Julian had come back to seek her forgiveness. In his irrational mind, he'd successfully grounded her, the jealous prick. If he couldn't have her, he'd clip her wings. "—Do you still have friends in Titan, Julian?" Zara eyed him knowingly.

"Friends? No. I just..." he paused to pout. "Ten years without you, I couldn't do it. I couldn't let you go."

"Fuck off."

"I..." he mumbled, starved for words.

Zara shook her head, disgusted but ambivalent.

"Forget it. You know what? I don't care anymore."

"Don't care?" Julian repeated, stupefied.

"There's no interstellar mission, Julian. It's all a cover story for the Pilot, a red herring. Malik was never going to send me to Alpha Proxima. There isn't a mission. There never was."

Julian smiled dumbly. "But... —but that doesn't make any sense. The capital to build the Victoria, fake the Titan drives, all to pull-off some chicanery... —you're sure of this?"

"As sure as I am of anything at the moment," Zara admitted.

"You're talking about a conspiracy."

Julian knew Zara's disdain for conspiracy nuts. Le Boudin's bullshitters were renown for parroting the latest Trade rumors: gene hacks introduced into Kamchatcka's drinking water; mysterious space-borne 'assassination' lasers; Santiago's subway mind-control network, etc...

"They're trying to kill me. They think I'm going to commit espionage, expose them, expose the program." The truth was Zara had already disclosed to CGT.

He chuckled, incredulous. "Kill you?"

Zara mentioned the Va-gas ambush, sidestepping the minor details of the drift-dive. It wasn't her job to convince him. Whatever confidence she'd once had in Julian was gone.

"Is that why you're in disguise?"

Zara nodded.

"Jesus, Zara. You're taking this kind of far, huh? Maybe you should get yourself some professional help."

"—I have," Zara replied, curtly. "My neurologist, Pierre, is on board. He believes me. In fact, he's helping me travel to Lagrange."

"Pierre, huh?" Zara ignored the jealous hint. "Lagrange and the Titan Spur —the belly of the

beast— why would you want to travel there?"

"I need to expose Malik. He wants me dead. I need leverage."

"You really are paranoid, aren't you?"

"No. This is real."

The Noctarium exploded in symphony of screeches and evol howls. The interruption caught Zara's and Julian's attention. Both got up to investigate. Standing at the glass, they peered into the night-scape. Through the gloom, a storm of evols raged around the foot of a Palm Morrel. They'd treed something. Their favorite prey, the gangly leporids, lived in warrens under the loam; and they'd little interest in skin bird eyries and troll fly hives. Glowing eyes searched for ways up into the fungal fronds. A few had managed a rope from a column of vines draped over a neighboring copse.

"What's out there?" Julian asked.

A bead of indigo danced on his chest. Before she could shove him to the floor, the safety glass shattered into a wall of diamonds. The casing round struck him in the chest leaving a wet sucking crater. Another round whistled past, silent and hollow. A glass of water exploded. Diving to the ground, she dragged Julian underneath the window for cover.

She called his name. He tried to answer but couldn't, blood percolating from his lips. He started to fade. Pushing a hand into the grievous opening, Zara attempted to stem the flow. Cardiac arrest. His hands clawed rigid. Seconds later, he was gone, eyes dilated and frozen.

A blue trace zig-zagged over walls and cabinets. The second round had no report, the weapon silenced. The sniper was a deft hand. The evol

screech reached crescendo. The trace slowed to a jittery dot. With another howling tantrum, the dot disappeared.

Afraid to look, Zara stayed hidden. She heard the thud of flesh striking soil and a pained grunt. The little army of bipeds had knocked the marksman from his perch and to the ground. His groans turned shrill. Zara popped up for a peek. Through spinnakers of fractured glass, lightning exploded from behind a Morrel. Little hands covered gibbous eyes. The evols scattered. Armed with a sparker pistol, the sniper made a last stand.

The berserk evols circled and lunged. More sparks as the sniper drained the pistol's capacitors. Electrocuted little bodies toppled in smoking piles.

The sniper limped backwards and tripped over a tangled root. An alpha-evol, broad-shouldered, sinewy but stalky, leaped on to his head and tore. With jaws wide and hackles bristling, the beast made quick work of the man's face. Nothing more than a spigot of hemorrhaging arteries, his neck folded under the weight of his wobbly head.

In triumph, the little alpha plunged its fists into sockets, bursting eyeballs in desecration. After another primal roar, the evol swaggered away. The females crept out from under a moss-draped toad stool for a look. After poking and prodding the corpse, the troop collectively abandoned the man. Zara approached. The females, in a strange reverence, bowed prostrate.

At her feet lay a crumpled evol. Zara kneeled and studied the animal. Riddled red with burst blood vessels, its clouded eyes gazed into the false sky. Turgid claws clutched mossy tufts. Below his right shoulder, A scorch wound marked the entry

point. Its muscles were sinewy and rigid, its body cooked through. The stink of fused flesh and burnt hair forced a dry wretch. The evols' constitutions were no match for the sparkers at close range.

Zara wiped a way a tear, then another. Crying, but why? Her ex-lover lay dead just meters away, murdered, and here she was sobbing over this little animal. Dark feelings, once forgotten, blossomed. She reached out and pulled down the evol's eyelids then crossed its tiny arms over its chest in repose. One last look. One last blessing for the sacrifice.

"I'm sorry."

She got up and walked over to inspect the sniper. A gendarme by his uniform, special forces by his rifle, the man was a trained assassin. Sleek with a special designed lunar muzzle, his weapon wasn't a typical smuggler kluge. Officially banned by the Lake, Legion kept the odd projectile weapon handy. Zara pulled out a console from her kit bag and thumbed it. Two mug shots appeared, one of her —an old badge photo— and one of Pierre, still with hair and horn rims. In the dim light, the assassin must have mistaken Julian for Pierre.

Gone was any pretension of making her death look like an accident. Malik, Titan, LISP —whoever— wanted her dead. Somewhere in her perforated cerebellum, classified information leached out unchecked. She was too much of a liability. The simple answer was to kill her.

But why Pierre? Mop-up, perhaps. Through Zara, he'd learned enough of Lagrange's mind-meddling to reverse engineer Titan's handiwork. He was too smart. Not answerable to Legion, Pierre was an HIL employee, and he could be compromised.

Pocketing the sniper's console, Zara looked around. Early civvy morning/legionnaire afternoon, only a few of the Noctarium's apartment lights were on. Most of the enlisted were on duty. With the melee over, the menagerie's normal cacophony returned. The Noctarium's keepers wouldn't notice the aftermath for a few hours yet. Grabbing the rifle from the blood-soaked loam, Zara ejected the remaining rounds and tossed the weapon into a fern bush.

Back at her apartment, a swarm of butterflies had fluttered through the shattered window. Hitting the lights, the insects scattered. Tearing a sheet from her bed, Zara draped the bleached flannel over Julian's corpse. Blood wicked up and out into a Rorschach puddle of red. She was thirsty. Gulping a glass of water, she noticed her hand was free of jitters. There was a light knock at the door. Pierre. Zara let him in.

"Jesus..." he gasped as he stepped inside. He focused in on the sheeted corpse.

"It's Julian. A Legion sniper killed him. He shot him right through the window," she said, pointing, "...from out in the Noctarium."

More critters busily explored her apartment. A few snake-sized centipedes had spilled in from the breached window. Fleeing the riled evols, a clutch of terrified leporids had burrowed under a lounge. Pierre cowered against the wall.

"Why are you so calm?"

"The sniper's dead, Pierre. The evols got him."

Drool pooled over his lower lip as he tried to speak.

"You don't believe me, do you? I can go back out there and get the rifle if you'd like," she said, agitated.

"No!" Pierre put a hand to his head, part terror, part disbelief. "Don't go out there."

"Do you have the stuff?" she asked, pointing to his satchel.

"I don't know if I can do this. This is too much. Maybe if we just went to the gendarmes and explained everything..." he said, pacing.

"The sniper that did this was Legion special operations," Zara said, a single eyebrow perked. "He was wearing a uniform. We can't trust anyone. Now they're trying to kill me outright, no set-up, no accident, and..." she paused.

"—And what?"

"—And they're trying to kill you, too." She pulled out the sniper's console and flashed Pierre's mug shot. "Julian wasn't the intended target. It was you."

"This can't be happening," he whined.

"Look at me." She snapped her fingers. "We need to get leverage. We need to expose Malik and Titan, and I need you to help me get to Lagrange. Understand?"

Pierre nodded, lips pinched between teeth.

"Do you have the stuff? I got the uniforms."

Pierre pulled both satchels from his shoulder and handed one of them to her. Zara rifled through it. All the civvy gear was there, everything she'd ask him to procure: two badges —fakes of course— but with the correct program markings and access tickets. Also included was a diagnostics kit complete with remote breaker and two prepaid RFID ticket swipes: destination Lagrange. Pierre, always meticulous, brought along other civvy and wayfarer gear for effect, anti-nausea/anti-vertigo injections, two pairs of solar goggles, and two console decks.

"You remembered the most important thing." Zara pulled out a black marking pen.

It was a way to confuse the facial recognition hardware. The Lake —skipping to save— purchased low-grade recognition algorithms, easily fooled by facial asymmetry. A few subtle but deliberate ink smudges could trick the system from a distance. The key was to make it not look obvious. If the face-trick failed, the cheap contacts would scramble a retinal probe as a last defense. Applying a few marks, she penned in Pierre's face; subtle, not clown-like, just a few under-eye dabs and a hash along the left jawline. With a finger smear, the camouflage was finished.

"You ready?"

"I don't know."

Zara reached out and squeezed his hand. Like cracking a snail with hammer, she'd shattered his insular world. Pierre lacked a survival mode, a cagey resilience that she had taken for granted in herself. To shoulder him, she would have to nurse him along. She should have felt more guilty about it, but she didn't.

"Do you trust me?"

"I do, Zara," he sighed. "It's just..." he paused.

"Then come with me." She squeezed tighter. "I need you."

Head down, he nodded.

[CP] CHAPTER NINETEEN

The early shuttle would be leaving for Lagrange in a few hours. Plenty of time. No rush. Nice and casual. Play it cool. A whoosh of air announced the tram's arrival. The Noctarium's Metro station was empty, the trams running on diminished schedules. On board, a few civvies dozed, lulled by the thrum of the mag-lev's induction coils. Zara sat close to Pierre, her hand slipping into his lap. He squeezed with a sweaty palm.

"Stay with me, now."

"I'm all right."

Pierre pulled at his ill-fitting uniform. The Mer-Sea outfits fit him poorly. It was too broad in the chest. The utility jacket hung from his shoulders awkwardly.

"Just follow my lead."

He nodded.

Airlock B. The Lake. They passed through a tunnel of bulging IR blisters scanning bodies for fever, weapons, and bombs. More theater than practical, administrators claimed the scanners monitored the flow of people and disease. The Lake's union presence had long debunked the charade, however. Where there was a will, CGT guerillas always found a way.

Out on the streets of the Arc, Zara plotted a circuitous route through alleyways and conduit byways. She and Pierre hugged the walls, eclipsing the glut of camera pods dangling from the Arc's geodesic struts. The humidity—especially stagnant this time of day—drenched an already agitated

Pierre. Eyes stinging with sweat, his misery index climbed as Zara tried to ignore his wheezes.

"There's a taxi stop near Indiago Security Systems. We can catch a ride to the shuttle concourses from there," Zara said.

"A little conspicuous."

"I've got it covered."

Popping out into one of the business park's turnabouts, Zara knocked on the tinted glass of the carryall. The door slid open. Climbing into the back, Zara barked their destination. The price flashed on the meter. Zara paused deliberately. Pierre tapped his knees. Agonizing seconds ticked away until the price flashed double. With a swipe of the pay sensor, the vehicle lurched ahead.

"What was that about?" Pierre asked.

"I'll tell you later."

The Lake had its underground railroads. For a price, the Khmer cabbies switched off their fair manifests, deleting mugshots, payment info, and any detail Legion could use to identify a passenger. It was an easy way to clandestinely move gear and people.

Through the Arc's airlock and onto the Lake's outer beltway, the taxi headed for Terminal One of the central lift concourse. There was little traffic on the road, just a lone column of crawlers queued up for a logistics run. Rumor of a nightfall offensive on the Far Side had put Legion on alert. A tritium mine had been hit just days before starving Polar Command of fuel. Resources were being 'reallocated' in response.

Through an automated checkpoint, the cabby pulled into the departure bay's airlock. Getting out, they headed for the security queue. Nervous minutes. Zara noticed Pierre's courage flagging.

Passing a huddle of security grunts, Pierre shirked. Legs twitchy, he was wide-eyed with fear. He was rethinking the plan, she could tell. With access to an arsenal of anti-psychotics and anxiety meds, she could only wonder why he hadn't self-prescribed beforehand.

"Two Mer-Sea techs bound for L-1." The checkpoint operator swiped their tickets, peering at them through beady big-girl eyes. "Purpose?"

In their haste, Zara hadn't thought of a cover story. Mer-Sea was Legion's uplink contractors, responsible for routing orbital communications. A ubiquitous lot, Zara never paid them any mind until she'd managed a few uniforms from Ho, Trinh's fixer brother.

"We're heading up to work on the HARM-12 umbilical trackers," Pierre said, stepping in. "The phased arrays are having dither problems, losing link, all that. Avengers are falling out of the sky like flies. It's a mess. We need to recompile the bit scrambler on the beam former."

Face screwed up, the woman handed them back their tickets and quickly ushered them through. Into the concourse, Zara led Pierre to a quiet lounge near the shuttle gate.

"Where did all that come from?"

"I read 'Jane's Defence Weekly'... as a hobby," he said, slightly embarrassed. "There was a blurb on Mer-Sea's link architecture. Details like that just stick."

"I'm impressed."

"Sometimes useless trivia isn't so useless."

Zara checked the departure board. One hour and twenty minutes to launch. After grabbing a bulb of coffee from an auto-mat, she joined Pierre in the

lounge. The low ambient lights –psychologically tuned to pacify nervous wayfarers– eased the mood.

"No coffee, right?"

"On occasion, but not now." Pierre pinched his eyes closed. "It's just booze. I can't do booze."

Beyond the lounge's polarized glass, the Lagrange-bound shuttles idled. Ugly machines, they lacked the finesse of Legion hardware. Their sensoriums were old and creaky. Zara imagined flying the vehicles was like wearing a nineteenth century deep-sea diver suit.

"Did you love him?"

Zara turned to Pierre. The question blindsided her.

"Julian. Did you love him?" he repeated.

"I don't know."

Zara hadn't given the question much thought. While together, she and Julian had an unwritten rule when it came to confessionals: let there be none. Lovers were a paradox, a wave and a particle; the relationships dependent on the individual's frame of reference. To exclude time decay –to exclude hindsight– made little sense. At one time she may have loved Julian, but history mutated memory. Nostalgia was one's polished version of history, rarely exact.

"You don't sound so sure."

Zara grimaced but said nothing.

"I just don't see how you were able to..."

"–Watch my ex-boyfriend get murdered...?" Zara interjected, "and act so casual about it?" She gripped her coffee, fingernails digging into the bulb's preform. She paused then went on. "I don't know, honestly. Time amputates life's unnecessary limbs, and only phantoms remain."

"And Julian was an unnecessary limb?"

Zara knew what Pierre was getting at, his squinting made it obvious. She tried to explain herself. After a pause she blurted, "...not unnecessary --no-- more like 'vestigial.'"

"And when do people become 'vestigial'?"

She didn't answer. Looking away, she grew angry. "I know what you're thinking."

"What am I thinking?" he asked.

"You think I'm a cold heartless bitch. You think I use people, and you think I'm using you."

"I didn't insinuate that," Pierre said, his tone calm and measured.

"Whatever."

"Zara, look..."

"--You know..." she interrupted, "I could make the same argument about you. You used me as your lab rat, because you think Legion stole HIL's research. You thought by vivisecting me, you'd be getting back at them. A little revenge."

"--Enough," Pierre craned his head, on the lookout for eavesdroppers. "That's not true. You know it. I know it."

With the urge to bite, Zara coiled. To explain her behavior --to make excuses for herself-- was an affront. All her life, she'd fought that fight and had grown weary of it. But Pierre was undeserving, and he was right; she knew better.

"I don't blame you for this... this crisis," he whispered, "and I don't think you're a 'cold heartless bitch.'"

"--Then what do you think about me?"

"You should know by now what I think about you," he sighed, exasperated. "I've scanned, digitized, modeled, and synthesized your mind. I'd like to think I've a pretty good appreciation of your current circumstance."

"You pity me."

"Pity? No." Pierre changed the subject. "Julian exploited you in drift-dive. It was him, wasn't it? He used your father to get to you. Then he betrayed you."

She remembered more now. Nicholas was his name – the plant –the ruse –Julian in disguise. Emotionally extorting her as a father-mimic, he'd forced a dreamy artificial bond. Zara slowly nodded. Pierre was right.

"And your father betrayed you, too," he went on.

"The drift-dive wasn't about my father. It had nothing to do with him."

"But you mentioned him..."

"–My father didn't betray me," Zara protested.

"Not in the same way –sure– but he wasn't there for you."

"–It's totally different."

Knowing the details of her father's death meant nothing in the end –it changed nothing– despite the taint of CGT's ignoble catastrophe. Zara felt the same, the hurt, a cold dull ache. The wayfarer's truths, focused like a laser, failed to make up for lost decade. She had never stopped to quantify 'closure.' In the end, knowing how her father died made little difference.

"How was it different?"

"His betrayal wasn't deliberate, not like Julian's."

Julian didn't deserve to die, but some dark corner of her id was satisfied. Selfish, possessive, jealous, Julian had it coming. And despite the horror, she could only greet his death with indifference.

"Deliberate or not, the result's the same."

"Maybe."

"Look... I'm sorry about Julian, and I'm sorry about your father, but you shouldn't feel guilty."

"I don't... and that's the problem. They're dead, and I feel nothing, absolutely nothing. They might as well be strangers."

"Zara..."

Before her father left —before the rage and the monomania— she liked to think herself a more delicate person, a girl with proper sensibilities. Instead, she'd grown more angry. Anger was her shield. Churning the dirge into mania, it was her fuel. Nothing else mattered. Friends were useful acquaintances, lovers vice, but anger was a means. And as much as she'd tried to grieve for her father —and for years she'd desperately tried—rage starved the process. Pain morphed into prejudice, a hardwired friend-or-foe algorithm. People were not to be easily trusted.

"I'm a terrible friend."

"Nonsense. What are you talking about?"

Zara shook her head and swiped the moisture from her eyes. "Do you want to know something?"

He nodded.

"I've been at the Lake four years, and you're the first honest friend I've made, and now I'm wrecking it."

"—You're not wrecking it—"

"But you pity me."

"No. As I said, I care for you, and I'm concerned for you, but I don't pity you."

Zara looked at him and said nothing. Pierre was more emotionally mature than she gave him credit for, and in crisis, even more so. His bookish looks betrayed him. Growing older, a little more filled out, his balding head grayer, he would become more handsome.

Why had he given her the benefit of the doubt? Was it his schoolboy crush? It was something more sublime. With every reason to argue her paranoia and re-educate her on the finer details of limbic schism and split consciousness, Pierre had accepted her story despite everything. He truly believed what she had told him. Pierre was her opposite: trusting, an idealist. And as a result, she found herself peculiarly attracted to his optimism.

"I never apologized to you for the other night."

Brow wrinkled, he tried to remember. "That?" he smirked, remembering her fumbling kiss. "But you were drunk, and you did apologize."

"Being drunk was just an excuse."

"Then what are you apologizing for?"

The automated voice announced the shuttle boarding. A few contractors, slumped and snoozing, stirred awake and readied themselves.

"Admitting it was a mistake... the kiss. It wasn't."

[CP] CHAPTER TWENTY

Kept on ice, in a holding pattern, bullshit babble about 'complications'; this was Zara's reality. Every test hinted at a healthy recovery, but they were keeping her too long. After a third urinary tract infection, she was ready to tear off her diaper and yank the tubes. They said clocks would confuse her. As a result, it was impossible to tell how long she'd been floating in her post-op tomb —two weeks? —three? The delay was torture.

"Why the hold up?" she'd barked at Malik.

"Your recent scan shows there's a catalyst issue with one of the protein sutures. We'd like to monitor it."

Bullshit. Zara knew it. "So, where's Dr. Mengala these days?"

"Monsieur Prost?"

Zara nodded.

Prost no longer came around. For that, Zara was thankful. More sinister with every visit, his exploratory psycho-surgery and regression 'therapy' suggested a hidden agenda. If she had to put up with any more of his Jungian extrapolation and quips about a dormant 'Electra Complex,' she would throttle the cigar-gnawing asshole. 'Your father' this, 'your father' that —every goddamned question... To pass the time, she fantasized ways to strangle him using a noose of surgical tubing.

"He's finished. You've provided him with enough data to complete his profile," Malik explained.

"A profile? What for?"

"That's classified."

"Whatever... anyway, good riddance... the pervert."

"Why do you say that?"

"Anybody that interested in Freudian father-daughter development is suspect."

"Enough. Time for your conditioning. Arturo will be with you shortly."

Arturo, with his umbilical test kit and weightless red friz, provided a welcome interruption. Malik had ordered Zara to begin Victoria sensorium training in-situ, despite the 'complications.' It was important to 'flex' the Pilot's drift-dive mechanics, so he said. Progress at last. Zara welcomed the escape.

Initially, the drift-dives made her ill. Like a shiatsu massage, the holistic torque proved nauseous. After a few episodes, the sickness faded, leaving her with brief post-dive headaches. Like sore muscles, the pain felt constructive. Zara felt her newly reformed mind flex and expand. Each episode improved her constitution.

"Your simulator results are off the charts," Arturo exclaimed. "Drift-dive stats are hovering at ninety-eight percent wakeful operability. You're literally able to fly the Victoria in your sleep."

"Arturo, why am I still here?"

Eyes dancing behind horn-rims, he paused then spoke. "I shouldn't..."

"—Please..." Zara begged.

Arturo looked around the tempest chamber, wary of open microphones. "There's been an event."

"An event? What kind of event?"

"An event that's got Titan's higher brass spun up. Some rumor about a 'causality' violation. Far-out shit."

"What else?"

"That's all I know." He disconnected the umbilical's remote from the central power bus. "Anyway, whatever's going on..." He eyed the chamber's one-way mirror. "There's a safety issue regarding your release."

"Unionists?"

"Not sure."

"—Arturo!" Malik's baritone roared over the intercom. "Do not speak to her!"

"Sorry, Zara."

Arturo quickly finished packing his gear and left. Afterward, Malik ordered all personnel to be escorted by Lagrange paramilitaries while inside Zara's chamber. The security commandos floated about as if born to zero-G. Like wasps, their cyclopiian goggles masked human eyes. Deft hands caressed cascade-diode lasers. Zara, partially naked, with orifices perforated and violated by all means of medical plumbing, felt vulnerable.

"What's up with the muscle?" she asked Malik.

"It's for your protection."

"Explain."

"No."

"Then I'm a prisoner?"

"It's not like that."

"Then can I go free?"

"No yet."

"It's a test, isn't it? You want to see if I've healed. You want to stress the Pilot implant."

"Despite a few minor complications, we have the utmost faith in your recovery. This is not a test."

Hyperbolic paranoia, the kind she remembered from the early days. Only a few weeks prior, her morphined mind fought itself in a pitched battle

for sanity. With the Pilot's neural zones healing, her cognitive functions had stabilized. Bi-hemispheric collapse and schizophrenic 'cross-talk' were no longer a concern. But the fear remained. A tear or a break would ruin her recovery. Relapse was a possibility.

"Tell me what's going on... outside?"

"I'll say this..." He started. Zara anxiously waited his answer. "There's an anomaly we've observed we're working to quantify. It concerns the 'containment' issue I spoke of before."

"The Titan drives?"

"Yes."

"Does it involve me?"

"That question is more complicated. More investigation is required."

In addition to the simulations and drift-dive exercises, Malik added more tests to answer his 'complicated' question. Technicians synced coincidence circuits—concocted by Titan's physics team—to Zara's umbilical. Piped through a fiber-optic bridle, the system measured her dorsal signals. Somewhere downstream, the flow mixed with an external timing circuit. Malik had mentioned something about thought, like anti-matter wave-states, collapsing to conserve parity. It was the 'twin' thing, she was sure. He wanted to quantify her 'foreign thoughts.'

The whole thing left Zara cold, but now—coupled with the 'causality' event Arturo had briefly mentioned—the mystery deepened. Maybe Titan's scientists were trying to measure the event, or it could all be some byzantine cover story. Exhausted and frustrated, she gave up guessing.

"I've had enough."

"This will all be over soon. Bear with me."

"Either launch me, set me free, or kill me."

"We can't do that," Malik replied.

"Why?"

"The reasons are classified."

"Fucking typical."

Malik shook his head, nostrils flaring.

The room's temperature climbed. The air was stuffy. Filled with commandos, scientists, and technicians, the cramped chamber exceeded an unsaid capacity. Her skin itched. Closing her eyes, she sought a yoga calm. She wanted to scream, go crazy. Nothing placated her. Only drift-dives — where her sleeping-self re-learned what her awake-self already knew— offered respites. But without constant sleep, the continued 'wakefulness' wore. How she would be able endure months at the helm of Victoria, she could only speculate.

More bullshit delays. Too exhausted to piece together a conspiracy, she only wanted to escape. Even the Lake, with its sticky overcrowded streets and dirty-wet air, seemed like a cold-crisp winter's day in comparison.

"I can't take it anymore."

No one listened. Arturo, his red frizzy head sympathetic, offered a dour look of pity. The others were more stoic, Malik worst of all. This sequestering was for her safety, they repeated.

"I hear voices..." Zara lied.

It was worth a shot. No one believed she was slipping back into an implant induced paranoia. Countless cranial probes and scans proved otherwise. No signs of bleed. Instead of paranoia, she was overcome with a sleep-deprived hysteria.

The tempest room was a prison. No escape. Manned by a cadre of flash-armored commandos, brute force

exfiltration was absurd. To escape the Titan Spur—and Lagrange itself— was impossible. Like an animal inside a trap, if she could just escape...

#

Zara felt the magnetic click of her spinal jack snap into the umbilical. The insulation gel cooled her nape. They informed her the experiment was susceptible to noise and required proper 'containment.' No one offered any further explanation. With their mixers queued, Zara bled digital thoughts into the fiber optic pipe.

Two technicians and a commando hovered about. Everyone ignored her. Through the room's one-way glass, Malik insured proper decorum. No talking. Fearful of another faux faux, he'd ordered the silent treatment. Zara goaded them. Insults about zero-G 'limp dick' —a common weightless malady—failed to provoke. Worst were the commandos. Shielded by their buggy headgear, they were faceless and robotic.

"Test cycle complete in two minutes."

"Ready for post modulation?"

"Waiting for the synchronizing cue..."

Zara's retinas blinked. A flash from an internal sequencing prompt, it tagged her thoughts for processing —or so she guessed; no one told her shit. Hours wore until it was time to pack. They were done with their plaything for the time being.

"Is the test over?" Malik croaked through the chamber intercom.

The men nodded.

"Duty sergeant, prepare for chamber breach."

The soldier saluted.

The portal unsealed but failed to budge. Klaxons erupted outside in an all station alarm. A robotic voice repeated a 'seek shelter' command. Hull

breach. Portals sealed, doors slid shut to preserve pockets of air.

"Keep it closed!" one of the techs yelled. "It's starting to open!"

The commando resealed the bulkhead as the technicians stood aside. Zara reached out, tubes and sub-dermal wires snapping clean. With his back to her, the commando paid her no mind as he tugged at the door's spin arm. She gently unclasped his baldric. One of the technicians noticed her, but it was too late; she'd snatched the laser rifle away.

"Not one move," she ordered, spinning the rifle about and aiming it. "Everyone, hands on the head." The weapon's weight felt comfortable against her shoulder.

At first, the commando complied, raising his hands to his head. A slight kick off the wall caused him to drift. Intentional no doubt, the goon was up to something. Zara primed the capacitors and cued the rifle's diode. The commando made his move, a quick twist and swipe at her weapon arm. Zara parried and re-aimed. With the blue dot hovering above his neck, she pulled the trigger.

A miss. The pulse glanced off the flash-armor and redirected the lethal light away. She re-targeted. The next sputter hit home.

Blood geysered in crimson cones from between his armored plates. Flesh sizzled. Skin melted. Constellations of hemoglobin clouded the air. The techs cowered in one of the chamber's corners. The dying commando spasmed. Somewhere beneath his armor and hormone-enhanced muscle, an artery hemorrhaged and drained his heart.

"What the fuck did I say?" Zara roared. She pointed the rifle at the techs. "You two stay put, god damn it!"

Both nodded, eyes filled with fear.

The klaxons quieted. The robotic voice announced an all clear. Zara tore away the remaining medical clutter and disentangled from her berth. Shoving the commando's body aside, she repositioned herself and crouched on the chamber's central strut. One foot anchored in a coil of power cables, Zara hunkered down.

"Let them go, Zara," Malik ordered over the intercom, his voice its usual soft baritone. "You don't want to hurt anybody else."

"I didn't mean to kill him. He just..."It was the truth. If he hadn't made a move, the dumb bastard would still be alive. "He should have listened."

"Fine. Understood." Malik capitulated.

The techs whimpered and huddled together. She couldn't let them go. No way. Without hostages, she had no bargaining power. Without them, Malik would send in the mob.

"Surrender your weapon. Enough."

"No."

The chamber walls were polished aluminum. The laser rifle –a non-ballistic weapon– would reflect the energy dangerously. A poorly aimed shot could back-flash and kill her. As long as the room's door remained sealed, she couldn't blast her way out. Using hostages, she was forcing Malik's hand. Something had to give.

"How long do you think you can hold out?"

"I don't know," Zara mused. "With the Pilot, indefinitely."

"That's not how the implant works. You know that."

If he wouldn't give her freedom, maybe he would give answers. "Why won't you release me?"

"It is not safe."

The flood lights dimmed as the one-way mirror dissolved. Beyond the glass, in the observation room, Malik sat at a console. He looked at ease, arms crossed, pressed jumper dry and free from stains. With calm eyes, he gazed at her, his lips curled with disappointment. Behind him, the amorphous silhouettes of on-lookers hovered.

"Not safe? That answer is unacceptable."

Zara bit down on her lip, feeling the tear of mouth flesh. With the indigo bead bouncing over one of her hostage's leg, Zara fired. The man yelped and reached for the burn. His wail was pig-like and pitiful.

"Stop!" Malik shouted.

"Tell me why you've kept me caged for four weeks..."

"—Two and a half—"

"Whatever..."

"Legion has decided to accelerate your launch date. An event —while manageable— has complicated things. We understand your hardship, but you must trust us," Malik tried to explain.

Nebulous, near useless, his explanation was woefully inadequate. "Specifics. What are you talking about? Are the celestial mechanics off, some unforeseen galactic nutation —what?"

A door opened into the observation room. A wedge of red strobe spilled in. The light, reflected and distorted, blurred Zara's eyes. A person hovered at the portal.

"We must follow certain laws," Malik continued. "We violate them –if it's even possible to violate them– at our peril."

The intercom crackled. Someone muttered something. A hushed panic. With a ping and a snap, the microphone went dead. Malik turned to the stranger. The window flickered opaque.

[CP] CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

"Have you ever hooked one of those up before?"

"Maybe. Can't remember."

Zara pulled out the squid-like breaker. Tentacles of bypass cables floated up and filled the tiny utility closet. The sky-blue glow of a nearby optical bus shed little light. Zara squinted at the breakout labels trying to decipher the routing codes.

"I brought a torch." Pierre pulled out a pocket light.

"—No. They might see it." She pointed to the thin-white outline of the access door. "That's a main passageway outside. Lots of traffic."

Without the sound of footsteps, zero-G added an extra-dimension to stealth. The advantage went both ways. While easier to avoid trouble, it was easier for trouble to sneak up from behind. Careful to not give themselves away, Zara grew paranoid. They'd gotten this far. Just a few more bulkheads and they would be inside the Spur.

"I think I've got it figured out."

If properly installed, the remote breaker would kill the power running into the Titan Spur. Just a tap of her remote console and lights out. Popping the distribution panel, Zara went to work rerouting the electrical lines through the bypass. With a pull of a latch-lever, kilowatts of redirected current wove through the detour.

"The fuses are stable," Zara said, tapping the breaker's diode indicators. "As long as they don't all use their coffee makers at once..."

"Are you sure about the blackout trigger?"
Pierre asked.

"As sure as anything."

Zara slapped a set of temporary patches to both their uniforms: Chronos, Titan's unacknowledged symbol, a point of pride for the unacknowledged contractors. Coveted swag, the emblems were as popular as Titan's 'trademarked' coffee bulbs. Attached to a lanyard were their fake access badges. No RFID, no biometric authenticators, they were nothing more than dumb slips of plastic. If used tactfully, however, a few 'coincidences' would gain them access.

"Are we done?"

"Yes. Have you checked the camera?"

Pierre pulled out the recorder. Telescopic light-stalks –infrared all the way up through ultraviolet– added spectrum clarity. If they were to going to photograph the Victoria mock-up, they would need proof. Every fake instrument panel, half-welded coolant pipe, and smear of epoxy required documentation. He snapped a picture of Zara.

"What are you doing?"

"Testing the camera," he said, flipping the screen around to show her the photo.

"I don't like my picture taken."

"Okay," Pierre said, confused. "I'll delete it."

On her console, Zara toggled through a set of mini-cams installed near the Titan access door. The vestibule was deserted, no loiterers, just the glow of a fish-eye scanner keeping vigil. Minutes passed when the inevitable opportunity presented itself.

"Time to tailgate," Zara said. "Get ready."

Four medical techs passed by, each gossiping inaudibly. Zara and Pierre quickly exited the utility closet and resealed the access panel. Strapping on their satchels, they grabbed ahold of the moving handrail. Similar to a moving sidewalk, the handrails ran continuously through Lagrange's labyrinthine corridors. Motivated by efficiency, zero-G engineers had decided all the bumping and tumbling was cumbersome. The handrails offered a more elegant solution.

A few meters from the portal, everyone detached. One of the techs approached the biometric identifier. After a quick retinal scan and a DNA swipe, the lock released. Aware of Pierre and Zara queued behind them, the techs scrutinized their badges to make sure they'd the proper clearance. Zara mustered a polite smile. Pierre looked more suspicious. Sweat bristled on the shorthairs of his balding head. His bloodshot eyes watched nervously.

"Long night?" one of the men asked Pierre.

Zara nodded and answered for him. "We've been pulling a double shift. We're one service call away from bunk time. There's a problem with the nexus alarm panel."

"A bit glitchy, that one," remarked another. "Looks like they finally called in the Mer-Sea big guns, eh?"

"You two, let me have a closer look at your badges," said the man unsealing the portal lock.

His eyes hinted at recognition. More scrutiny than Zara would have expected. Zara held up both their badges. Fake of course, the photographs — complete with holographic watermark and Titan access tags— fooled the eye. Where biometric scanners were infallible, the human eye betrayed.

The tech glanced from badge to face until at last, he gave a tentative nod. 'Tailgating,' while frowned upon by security officers, offered an acceptable means to bypass protocol.

"You guys are good," he said at last.

All entered into Titan Spur's dim central corridor. With a pneumatic hiss, the portal sealed. Every section of Lagrange had its own hum: the hiss of HVAC, the electrical thrum of A/C transformers, but Titan had its own chthonic howl.

"How's the patient?" one of the techs asked another.

"No complications, so far," the man replied. "Blood work shows no sign of infection. Drift-dive results are robust. Still a bit of residual paranoia, however." He was older than the rest, one of Titan's neurosurgeons Zara suspected. "The implant's stable, so it's hard to tell what's causing it. Maybe a little patient exhaustion. We're not sure."

They were talking about the second Pilot candidate —Zara's replacement— another unsuspecting lab rat. Maybe this time they'd tapped someone more malleable, someone less volatile. She pitied the soul, to go through all the madness again; the ragged sanity, the aching recovery...

"And what about the other one?"

"Patient Alpha? Terminated. The swap didn't take. Too risky. Malik got worried and pulled the plug."

Zara gestured for Pierre to slow down and let the four drift ahead. Lagging, they both waited until they were no longer bunched up.

"They think I'm dead," she whispered.

"Are you sure?"

"Patient Alpha? Terminated? Who else would they be talking about?"

The order had been given, but her execution was a work in progress. Malik's second assassination bid had failed. Less than a day after, the sniper's corpse was still mouldering on the Noctarium's floor. But word would leak out. Then a third attempt. By then, Zara hoped her photos of the whole Victoria ruse would be uploaded, and ready to deploy like a tomb bomb.

"Are you ready with the kill switch?" Zara asked.

"Got it."

When they arrived in the nexus, the med-techs were gone. A lone guardsman manned the empty interchange. Hangar One, home of the mysterious 'shadow Victoria,' loomed to their right, its door sealed. The other four airlocks were open. Clogged with storage blisters and ducting, the hallways resembled an inflamed colon. Above lay Hangar Two and below lay the medical wing and the Pilot implant research facility.

"Are you two a level three?" the guard shouted.

Zara looked down at her badge. "No, level two."

He drifted down to greet them. A whiff of cologne. Zara hated the smell. Something about the cloying odor in zero-G. "Your destination?"

"Hangar One." Zara pointed to the sealed airlock.

The guard shook his head. "No chance. Only level fours allowed –hell, I'm not even allowed in there – on whose orders?"

"The work order says there's a faulty repeater linked to the alarm system," Pierre added, pretending to read from his console screen. "Cross-link's bad, lots of dropouts, false alarms,

that kind of thing. Probably the multiplexer. Generation six models always had poor isolation." Pierre had a knack for confusing tech-jargon, even more so when it was all make-believe.

Confused, the guard capitulated. "Wait here. I need to head up to operations. I'll see if I can pull up the work order. Someone screwed up."

Both nodded and waited until the guard left. Zara cued up the remote and hit the breaker. Blackout. Undulating light arrows plotted routes to emergency exits. A calm but stern artificial voice gave instructions. Hydraulic pumps and servos kicked to life. With a gush of recycled wind, air pressure changed as portals and airlocks temporarily opened.

"You have ten minutes to evacuate. Follow routes to designated rally point," the voice repeated.

After years of power glitches, they had gotten tired of finding trapped corpses –suffocated and overheated from HVAC power failures– engineers got wise. Embedded into the emergency protocols were subroutines to briefly open Lagrange's doors and allow escape, assuming no hull breach of course. Hidden by the chaotic darkness and with unlimited access to the entire Spur, Zara had found a way into Hangar One.

Swarming like fireflies, torches spiraled in from Hangar Two and the medical wing. Voices, some joking, others annoyed, extinguished the quiet. To their right, Hangar One's door stood wide. A sparse spangle of LEDs filled the darkness. Zara repelled off a bulkhead and floated headlong towards the black. Pierre, hesitated then followed, his body in a clumsy spiral twist.

Slamming into cargo nets, Zara fought her way out of the nylon mesh. Ensnared beside her, Pierre

struggled to free his gangly limbs. Gaining her bearings, she peered into the hangar, eyes struggling to dilate. The other Victoria floated in a halo of klieg lamps. Its graphite skin was worn and pocked. Steaks of atmospheric burn bearded the forward fuselage. No longer the pristine starship, it looked more like a battle-worn bomber.

"That's a shock stain," Zara pointed out.

"What do you mean?" Pierre asked, wrestling with the camera's optics.

"Exospheric exposure, hypersonic burns."

Grappling a catwalk, they headed for the cabin gangway. Past the flaccid ghosts of empty haz-mat suits, Zara approached the ship's airlock. An automated voice squawked between klaxon bursts, warning of 'hangar-wide' containment failure.

Containment failure? Zara wasn't so sure. Used to isolate anti-matter, containment fields were exotic, expensive, and rare. To encapsulate an entire room was a massive undertaking. It all seemed far-fetched.

"The airlock's open."

"Camera on?"

"Yeah," Pierre replied. "Good to go."

Through a slit in the plastic sheeting, they floated inside the cabin. It was the smell, the musty odor of stale food and old sweat. Zara reeled. Hermetic rooms, crammed with human beings, it was the ubiquitous odor of zero-G. But this was inexplicably distinct... familiar. Déjà vu and vertigo. Closing her eyes, Zara froze.

"Are you all right?"

"I need a moment." She paused then went on. "Come on. Let's document this sideshow."

The cabin and adjoining cockpit was a mess. Like a forensic scene, the walls and bulkheads were cordoned into a wire grid. Maddeningly meticulous, every bit of junk —down to empty food containers and clothing wads— had been tagged with a bar code. Zara and Pierre twisted and contorted through the orthogonal maze.

"This is a mock-up?" Pierre asked, taking a few pictures.

"I don't know what this is," Zara replied.

In the cockpit, the thread-bare gravity chair and gutted consoles looked ancient. For a shiny new cockpit —or an imitation stage prop— the finger-worn control pads and consoles looked like modern relics. The detail was impressive. Zara inspected the umbilical mount. Gold pinned and machined from anodized aluminum plate, it was built to last.

"I don't know about this, Zara."

"Don't say it."

This was not a mock-up; this was something else. 'What ifs' stacked on top of 'whys.' She slid into an inchoate panic. Pierre stopped taking pictures and looked at her, terror in his eyes. A universe of guilt exploded like a bomb. She'd been wrong, stupefyingly wrong.

"This isn't a mock up, is it?"

Zara said nothing, then nodded.

Pierre said something else, but Zara didn't hear him. Reaching up, she grabbed an object strapped above the gravity chair. At first it looked like a necklace, but the object was too big. Fiery red and shell-like, it was an appendage, a severed claw of some mammoth insect. Under a half-retracted talon, a bristly pad formed a fingertip. Snapping it from its thong, Zara held it to her

chest. The shape was elegant and streamlined; a blend of hard and soft, its texture felt perfect. A mnemonic. Memory surged then resolved, pulsing but ambiguous.

"Zara, can you hear me?"

"I..." she held up the object. "This... I know this..."

"We need to leave. Take it with us."

Pierre squeezed his way through the wire matrix. Bewitched, Zara hovered, unable to move. At the airlock, he folded the camera and stowed it in his satchel. A gust pushed the plastic sheets open, the fluttering tails whipping inside the doorway. A flicker of speckle. Dabs of iridescent blue peppered Pierre. Her throat dry, Zara tried to scream but only moaned. Another gust parted the plastic. Indigo pinpricks dotted Pierre's eyes like famine flies. Coupled light glowed in his corneas.

No report, just the waft of smoke and boiling flesh. Eyeballs burst, teeth cracked, lips swelled. The laser-fire seared his skull. Megawatts of collimated infrared exploded from all angles. Blood mist flecked the eggshell of the cabin walls. Pierre's lifeless body buoyed to the ceiling and bounced. Zara reached for him and screamed.

Not again.

[CP] CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Zara couldn't remember what he looked like, what he sounded like, his quirks. Pierre had faded to an indelible stain. Another image appeared.

From the claw —which they'd allowed her to keep— she imagined a creature beautifully constructed. The angel-being was a butterfly, but powerful and primordial. Streamlined limbs protruded out from a slender body, its proportions a perfect Fibonacci ratio. But it was his massive eyes that bore the soul. Behind the array of moth-eyes, he evoked an outcast's sadness.

When they'd apprehended her, she would not — could not— move. Pushing aside Pierre's corpse, the commandos swarmed her. Why they had killed Pierre and not her —their true target— didn't make any sense, especially after Malik had wasted so much capital trying to kill her. Now locked away inside this prison cell, she could only assume they'd changed tack.

It was a tempest chamber, a recovery room, similar to the one from her post-implant recovery. More stripped down, the space was empty of medical equipment. Save a spot lamp and a blank LCD screen, little light filled the space. Below, a generator supplied a containment field, its throb hypnotic. Hours, a day, maybe two days had passed, but she'd no sense of time.

She awoke from a nap. The chamber's observation window digitally dissolved. On the other side sat Malik, his face half-obscured by shadow. He said nothing at first, lips curled in a suggestion of pity. Stoic, he was always hard to gauge.

"We didn't mean to kill him. It was an accident," he apologized over the intercom.

Zara did not reply.

"You're a determined girl, Zara. Some might say obsessed. I imagine you would like some answers."

No, strangely, Zara's appetite for answers abated with Pierre's death. The paranoia gone, she felt numb. "Why didn't you kill me when you killed him? It would have been easier."

"The situation has changed; things are more fluid. Our calculations no longer require your termination. With you under our auspices, developmental opportunities have presented themselves. We are looking into running a few tests."

"Tests? Explain."

Malik closed his eyes and shook his head. Zara knew him well enough to know he wouldn't oblige her. "It's too complicated."

"Are you going to kill me afterward?"

"We are unsure of your end as of yet," Malik said. Like the Gambian warlords from his youth, questions of life and death were a matter of practical necessity, nothing personal. "I'll say this: Unfortunately it was you, Zara, who decided our course of action. We were perfectly willing to let you move on with your life, but you corrupted yourself."

"I don't understand."

He pursed his lips then spoke. "Yes... you do."

Malik knew about the wayfarer. To debrief her, then decide to kill her? Erratic and unlikely. A LISP informant had caught wind of their meeting. She'd been trailed. To mop up, Legion and Titan had decided on an extra-judicious killing, clean,

no messy tribunals... Clandestine protocol wasn't her forte. She wasn't a spy; she was a pilot.

"Titan's a lie isn't it?"

"A lie?"

Zara explained her conspiracy: Titan was about the Pilot implant and nothing else. The Victoria and its interstellar mission was just a cover. As she carried on, Malik shook his head dismissively. Mid sentence, her words fell apart, their meaning obsolete, contrived, farcical.

"-Stop, Zara," Malik raised a hand. "You don't sound so sure. Why is that?"

Zara paused then went on. "The Victoria's real, isn't it?"

He nodded. "Last month, you emerged from what you thought was Pilot implant surgery, but what was in fact a post-mission safing procedure," Malik explained.

"What mission?"

"The first interstellar voyage to Alpha Proxima, of course, aboard the Victoria spacecraft. Although, it seems you never made it to your intended destination. You arrived someplace else—'someplace' being an uncertain locale. We're still trying to trace the details of your voyage."

"Bullshit," Zara barked. "What about time dilation? Instantaneous space travel's impossible."

"—No, not impossible, apparently. Listen to me." Malik leaned forward, hand pressed to the glass. "You have already successfully completed the flight. It's over. We have your debrief. We have the flight logs and umbilical recordings. We have camera footage. We have it all."

"No way." Zara shook her head. "I don't believe you."

Depending on acceleration profiles, interstellar media densities, and space-time perturbations, the flight would have taken a decade or more.

"There was a mechanical glitch."

"A glitch?"

"The Titan drives went into runaway acceleration—unbeknownst to you. The Gaussian flux increased ad-infinitum. The Victoria achieved near light speed for an indefinite period of unquantifiable time. Effectively in suspense, the spacecraft's cesium clocks—your local clock—slowed to a quantum crawl. Years collapsed into fractions of a second, eons of years spanned in eye blinks, like a black hole's event-horizon you were frozen in its quasar amber, trapped within the Schwarzschild Radius.

"Your voyage has proved a cosmological dilemma. The Victoria arrived back at Lagrange anti-nodal from its launch vector; that is you arrived from the opposite direction. A complete circumnavigation of space-time. Quite the Magellanic feat. A few Titan-briefed astrophysicists have some ideas, but no definitive theory. The Victoria's flight was an experiment. But what it proved, no one's quite sure."

"If I piloted the Victoria, why didn't you ask me what I thought?" Zara sneered, "before your little 'safing' procedure wiped out all my memories."

"Not all of them," Malik continued. "The Victoria's distorted time-frame failed to provide a unique set of observables. In fact, there's no atomic clock capable of such an extreme sampling-rate. We're talking femto-second Niquist."

Malik hand-waved esoteric theories of which Zara only possessed cursory knowledge, talk of a

multiverse, parallel and sequential manifolds of infinite Hilbert space, etcetera... They believed she'd experienced the 'Big Crunch,' a 'Big Bounce,' and then another 'Big Bang' almost simultaneously. Through an extrema of statistical probability, the Victoria had pushed into an adjacent membrane somewhere beyond the known universe. What puzzled Titan most, Malik explained, was Zara's simultaneous return. "It defies causality, almost completely. You and the Victoria are technically older than the known universe." Outdated theories —like the Steinhardt-Turok cyclic model— had been dusted off. The working model involved a duplicate universe, a twin of Earth's. "The sky was the same. You thought you were home —you should have been home— but it was a dimensional illusion."

"Where's there?"

Malik fiddled with his console. "Do you recognize this place?"

The LCD screen sparked to life. Grainy pictures formed. The film was a montage. Slow pans revealed a jungle world. Vast columns of giant vines stretched to vanishing points. Bits of the Victoria slid into view, the ship's massive intakes unfocused in the foreground. Behind, a biblical cloudscape churned. Freckling the sky, flying creatures dove and dodged effortlessly.

"Yes," Zara muttered. "I remember bits and pieces."

Movies of her dreams. What once was only imagined, now had substance. This far-flung realm, with its angel/demon battles, was not just bleed-induced psychosis or some virtual construct; it was real. Zara exploded with melancholy euphoria.

"You called it Xanadu, two moon-sized planets connected by a stretched remnant of a nickel-iron accretion; like Pluto and Charon, a twin world system, but physically conjoined with a single shared atmosphere. A marvel."

"I remember now." Zara wiped away a tear.

"And that is part of the problem."

"I don't understand."

Malik fingered a nearby console. The video feed changed over. It was Zara in a debriefing. Audio – piped in through the intercom– relayed the details of her interstellar voyage. Garbled but audible, a voice off-camera asked her questions. Something about Xanadu's diametric races, the insect-like Myr and the incorporeal hyper-intelligent Masters. Interpolated fragments firmed. The details flooded back. The mental cordon had broke. Déjà vu mutated. Clarity at last.

She watched herself, hair unkempt, shiny-eyed and exhausted but elated... naïve, stupid girl. If she had it to do over again... a swift hit to the Victoria's data drives would fracture their optical lattices. Bit scramblers would purge the remaining volatile memory, a catastrophic and 'unexplained' malfunction erasing the digital trail.

"Why did you take this experience from me?"

"To give you your life back."

"This mission was my life," she said, her words measured and firm. "You stole my identity. You stole everything I was and am, or ever will be."

"A Faustian bargain. Those creatures you encountered –the 'Masters' as you called them– were god-like and omnipotent, able to create and recreate life. It was one of the reasons we put Victoria in containment after you arrived."

"Just one of the reasons?"

Malik carried on. "If these self-replicating nano-machines had stowed away, they could..." Malik trailed off, the result apparently too dreadful.

It was a partial explanation, Zara suspected; he was leaving something else out. If Malik was telling the truth, Legion would want to exploit the Masters' technology for military use. The containment wasn't to contain alien stowaways, it was there to capture them. Prepping the Victoria's sister ship in Hangar Two, they would send out another pilot, this time better equipped to retrieve the technological manna from the elder gods.

"And you didn't trust me with this information."

"It's complicated, Zara."

"Bullshit. What about the other Titan pilot? Are you gonna wipe his or her brain too?"

"No."

"More trustworthy, I take it. I must have been the wrong choice. You and your cabal of conspiracy nuts think I'm a CGT operative, don't you? This is about my father, isn't it? You think I'm a union sympathizer."

"No," Malik replied, his voice calm, a forefinger curled pensively under his chin.

"Then what is it?"

"We have another Titan pilot readied; Like you, a determined person, but more..."

Zara patiently waited for him to continue.

"—More clockwork, less of a 'wild card'?"

Clockwork? What the hell was that supposed to mean? Writhing free, she floated to the observation window. She opened her mouth, pregnant with questions. Before she could speak, Malik

flipped a switch. The window faded opaque. With a click, the intercom hissed then was silent.

#

Like a lab animal, Zara spent the hours drifting between water tube, food dispenser, and the zero-G toilet. No privacy of course. Without a clock, she measured time via her own biology. She wasted the hours unraveling her funhouse reflection in the mirrored walls. Her flesh —complete with pores and freckles— appeared young, betraying its billions of years. Had the new Zara been left-handed or right-handed? No one had noticed a mirror-shift in her appearance; there was no way to tell. All her tattoos and asymmetric quirks were in the right place. Julian would have made mention to the contrary. Physically, she fit this world —this Earth— like a jigsaw piece.

She'd arrived at Lagrange from the opposite direction of Alpha Proxima, symmetry preserved. Calved off from an earlier Big Bang, she'd slipped through the fiery singularity like a giant boson threading a quantum needle. From her cockpit window's blue-shift blur, she'd flown through the collapse without so much as a hiccup.

This universe was her third, Xanadu the second, her home universe the first. The Victoria's return to its fractal origin had restored an initial condition. But it should have been impossible; chaos didn't work in such ways. Maybe she was a being composed of dark matter —an inert form co-occupying space in a dual universe— preserving both momentum and parity. Sub-atomic particles produced anti-pairs, why not her?

Idling away at the Victoria's controls, coffee bulb in hand, Zara had unwittingly consumed eons. In these moments, Trilobites succumbed to the

Permian-Triassic Extinction. In the time it took to nibble a protein biscuit, dinosaurs had evolved from their archosaur ancestors, then evolved again into proto-birds. During a swallow of soy yogurt, homonids sprouted into humans then trickled out of Africa to build a space-faring culture.

Zara thought of Newton's Cradle and its steel balls. With a click, the spheres transferred their momentum instantaneously. Another swing, and the cycle repeated. An apt analogy? She wasn't sure.

A month before, Titan released her from Lagrange to recover from implant surgery –or so she believed. Instead, they'd rearranged her synapses, capping and cordoning her memories of Xanadu. Schedule-wise, the launch was still weeks out; the remaining time to be filled with drift-dive conditioning.

The new Zara would have had to have launched the instant the old Zara arrived. But a month prior, her drift-dive skills were non-existent. Paranoid and doped, to pilot anything more than a wheelchair would have been ludicrous. The equal-and-opposite reaction couldn't have been instantaneous. A lag existed –weeks –days –hours –minutes inexplicably consumed.

With her mind thrashed, she took refuge in sleep. The HVAC hum and the thin halo of the overhead lamps calmed her. Confined, her universe had again collapsed.

#

Like a djinn, Malik reappeared behind the pixelated glass. He informed her Titan's scientists wanted to perform a few experiments. She fought them at first but was no match for the bulky security detail. To subdue her, they'd strapped her leg with a nurse full of mood

dampeners, a tamper-proof prison model with locking buckle. Techs in bunny suits coupled her spinal jack to a diagnostic umbilical. They were sampling her thought stream. Zara shouted questions, but Malik's henchmen were given strict orders not to talk.

A target of opportunity, Zara –the condemned prisoner– offered a tantalizing research subject. She knew Lagrange's engineers –dabblers, fiddlers, and mind-fuckers– they couldn't leave well enough alone. A galaxy of experiments ensued, and as a byproduct of their tinkering, Zara's dreams focused into memory.

Mnemonics unjammed her circuitry. Xanadu flooded in. Detail merged into quasi-hallucinations. Xanadu was too fantastical; how could it be real? Her fantasy world was no longer the mental construct of a psychotic mind; it was its own reality.

Beyond the microscopic weirdness of the Myr, the Beanstalk's vertical forests, and the mechanical ubiquity of the Masters, her alien guide Xu stood out. In him, Zara saw an archetype of masculine grace. Attraction was too strong a word; he was too alien. Something about this outcast soul –this Cephene effete– filled her with bittersweet longing. The graying of his eyes, his charred carapace... his death had been painful, unnecessary, and horrible. She remembered it! He was perfection and a martyr, a catalyst for all her grief and sadness.

"Zara?"

She wiped the crud from her eye. The voice was familiar. In the open doorway, a soldier hovered in flash armor, sparker holstered on his thigh. Zara mumbled at him.

"Zara, it's me, Bardu."

"Bardu?" she said, clearing her throat.

He floating in. She recognized his doughy face. Bardu always had that mouth-thing, that wet slack lip. Over the years, Legion hadn't been able to dull his goofy boyishness. She pulled back, coiling up fetal-like.

"I'm not here to hurt you."

"What do you want?" Zara asked warily. Of all people, Bardu had legitimate reasons for revenge.

"Look..." Bardu eyed the one-way glass. "This whole thing's fucked up –Titan's fucked up– and I'm sorry for what they did to you..." he paused, "I'm sorry for what we did to you." He pulled out a carbon blade. Zara yelped. He pushed a forefinger to his dopey lips and shushed her. "I'm not going to kill you...Christ!"

"What are you doing?"

"I'm going to cut the nurse off of you."

"Then what?"

"Then I'm going to set you free."

"Where am I going to go?"

"Your choice."

Bardu risked his life helping her escape. For whatever reason, his fells a mamman conscience had caught up with him. Bardu was a boorish motherfucker, but he wasn't a sadist. Despite his torture and blackmail at her hands, a simple morality compelled him.

"Outside here, you don't know me. Understood?"

"Got it," Zara replied.

They crept into the corridor, Bardu first. A nod indicated the 'all clear.' Groggy and dizzy, Zara struggled with equilibrium. Her stomach churned. Bardu reached out to keep her steady.

"You all right?"

"Yeah..." Zara held her forehead and waited for the episode to pass.

"This is where I bug out." Bardu's eyes darted around. "You're on your own from here."

"Where should I go?"

Bardu looked up and down the corridor, lips pursed, hemming and hawing. "The nexus interchange is back that way," he gestured. "But..."

"-But... but, what?"

"I think if you head that way..." He pointed opposite. "You'll find the answers you're looking for."

Making her decision, she held out her hand, fingers beckoning. "Let me borrow your sparker."

Bardu grabbed at his holster and pulled away child-like. "No way, Zara. If they catch you with it, they'll trace it to me."

"Bardu, you've come this far..."

He gritted teeth and let out a moan. Then with a sigh, he un-holstered the weapon and handed it to Zara grip first. She checked the cell and slipped it into her jumpsuit.

"Dial down the discharge to sub-megawatt. This model's a bad design. Fuck it up, and it'll short through your ulna."

"Got it. Thanks, Bardu."

"Take care of yourself, Zara."

"Will do."

Zara grabbed a handrail and headed into the heart of Lagrange's medical bays. So quick, so easy, it felt like a set-up. In a few minutes, security would notice Bardu's stunt. The nurse would register a flat-line, and a remote would eventually trigger an alarm, if it hadn't already. Not much time. Hand-over-hand, Zara sped away.

"Hey!" Bardu shouted from down the hall. "I forgot to thank you for introducing me to Trinh. The whole liquid nitrogen thing... it's part of our routine now."

She looked back and gave him a quick smile. "Au revoir, Bardu."

[CP] CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Through a maze of corridors, Zara headed deeper into Titan's medical wing. She passed a crew lounge where two technicians conveniently napped inside a cupola. She caught a cloying waft of cigar. Like a bloodhound, she followed her nose.

The corridor 'teed.' To her left, another medical wing stretched to a vanishing point. To her right was a cul de sac and a security kiosk. Inside the hutch, a haze diffused a cityscape of console light. Two gravity chairs marked 'program security' faced away from her, one of them occupied. A disembodied hand dangled from the armrest, the stubby end of a stogie wedged between gangly fingers.

Zara crept up from behind, propelling herself on fingertips. Personnel dossiers and LISP access paperwork—complete with security markings—filled the display panels. The smoker idly flipped through the workups, dragging and dropping each into a re-brief/debrief folder.

Zara carefully toggled the override on the gravity chair's strap winch. The nylon harness retracted without mercy. The smoker gasped then coughed. In a spasm, he let go the cigar, its glowing cherry breaking off into space. Zara pulled the power jack. The chair went dead, its servos locked.

"Help," the man rasped.

Zara floated in front of him, her sparker out and aimed point-blank, its green bars just shy of a megawatt. So close, the weapon would splatter-scorch a human skull.

"Is he dead?" she shouted.

Wincing from the compression, the wayfarer didn't recognize her. Hair cropped and blonde, with violet eyes and a few pounds thinner, Zara's disguise fooled him but only temporarily. After a moment, his face shifted.

"Zara?"

"Is my father dead?"

"How the hell should I know?"

Zara paused, her throat shuddering. "It was all bullshit. You made it all up. Petanque, the Sahara, Equatorial Guinea, Sao Tome —You never knew him at all, did you?"

The wayfarer shook his head. "I wouldn't know him from Adam," he admitted.

Zara fought the urge to pistol-whip him. He'd made up everything —their friendship —the CGT mission —the oil rig catastrophe —everything... so fucking gullible. She felt ashamed. Like hackers hired by a corporation to breach their own data-hub, Titan had contracted a LISP agent to test her vulnerabilities. Tantalized by bullshit, blinded by mania, she'd let this double-agent —this wayfarer— manipulate her, her paranoia overpowered by a thirst for answers.

"You recruited Julian too, didn't you?"

The wayfarer nodded, chest straining for breath. "He was exploitable, the lovesick fool; he practically begged us."

"You told me things about my father, things only people who knew him could know. How?"

"Interviews," he gasped.

"Julian?"

"Julian... yes, and yourself."

Before flight —before they'd wiped her mind— she had inadvertently offered LISP her father's

dossier. How exactly, she could only speculate.

"Who are you, wayfarer?"

"Bernard Prost, LISP counter-intelligence and psy-ops. Malik hired me for Titan. I recruit double agents and investigate high-risk candidates. When data leaks occur, I work as a contingency planner. I'm a fixer."

Zara hiccuped a laugh. "A contingency planner? Is that what Trade calls an assassin these days?"

"A messy word. Our work is much more surgical, more clinical, more necessary."

With two failed attempts on Zara's life, Prost's hubris was ironic. If he was the 'clinical' operative as he bragged, she would already be dead. Prost was a liar and a hack.

"Were the drift-dive 'stress tests' your idea?"

He nodded, veins bulging from his neck. "Release the straps," he begged. "Please."

Zara ignored him. "Why go to all the trouble?"

"The gauntlet testing needed to be comprehensive; we had to challenge your loyalties. In fugue, you were more susceptible, more exposed. We had to prove you could not be corrupted if ever you happened to fall into enemy hands. LISP constructed the scenarios to ensure fidelity. Anything less and your drift-diving self would have suspected the subterfuge. We were doing you a favor."

"A favor?" Zara swallowed. Prost's audacity stupefied. "This is about CGT and my father, isn't it? This was a loyalty test. LISP thinks I'm a closet unionist."

"The Pilot posed significant security issues. If captured, a trained interrogator could induce a drift-dive state through manipulation," he groaned. "We re-associated your flight experience

and capped it inside a protein matrix. Forced amnesia. It offered a quick fix. But with so much to risk, we needed to test you. It was a safing procedure."

"But I failed it, didn't I?"

"You and that HIL neurologist —whatever his name was— started digging around, and..."

"—His name was Pierre."

"Pierre, yes, so easily forgotten."

Zara discharged the sparker into the ceiling panel. The burst ruptured a power duct, catching it on fire. The black smoke stunk like melted tire. The sound of short circuits crackled then faded to a sizzle.

"Say his name," Zara ordered pointing the pistol. "Say it!"

"Pierre —yes, Pierre," the wayfarer mewled. He paused, carefully choosing his words. "You kept digging around. Through your and Pierre's tampering, your memory cap started to break down. Your paranoia got out of hand. Those hidden memories corrupted everything we'd so carefully dammed up. We wanted to give you the benefit of the doubt, but..."

"—Benefit of the doubt?" Zara smirked, incredulous. "You're joking."

Prost went on. "After Malik debriefed you, you were supposed to be redeployed. Everything would go back to normal. Everything in its right place. It would be as if your journey never happened. No one would know, including CGT. Instead, you chose to betray Legion. We wanted to do right by you —especially after such an extraordinary sacrifice—but you made it impossible."

Zara didn't buy it. 'Doing her a favor' was not part of Titan's post-flight brain scramble. Xanadu

was its own best cover story. Alien encounters, trans-dimensional space travel... street corner lunatics spouted more believable nonsense. If captured, she'd come off as a psychotic. There was something more.

"This isn't so much about Xanadu, is it?"

The wayfarer, lips blue, eyes bulging, only gasped. He would not speak. Zara cycled the chair power to unwind the straps. Inhaling, color returned to his face. The electrical fire continued to smolder. He coughed uncontrollably. Zara waited, trigger finger at the ready.

He shook his head. "Our motivations were more fundamental," he answered at last. "Your early arrival required an exotic level of contingency planning. To say that your return was unexpected is putting it mildly. We were desperate to 'close the loop' in the most literal sense. Failure to do so meant we risked total annihilation."

Xanadu was only a distraction to Titan's true modus operandi. The 'are we alone?' quandary of humanity's existential dilemma was just so much overhead. The Masters offered a window into greater power, but that's not what preoccupied Malik and Titan. The mechanics of Zara's flight proved the crux. Hidden in the flight logs and chronometer records lay a murky grail. Something about the Victoria's voyage disturbed them. Not so concerned with the 'where' of Zara's experience, their focus lay in the 'when.'

They had tried to glue the broken vase of her life back together, a meticulous and overly complicated task. But like a Shakespearean conspiracy, LISP's henchmen had farcically botched it. To cover their tracks, they'd opted for the

'zero-sum' solution: kill Zara. But that too proved an outrageous failure.

"Annihilation? What are you talking about?"

"Malik hasn't told you yet. You still don't know, do you?"

Klaxons screamed. Strobes painted the corridor in candy stripes. The fire had set off a general alarm. Down the corridor a flood of techs and security men poured through hatchways, a few coughing, some hollering. Halocarbon spilled in to extinguish the remaining flames.

The Titan crew rushed to the exits. In the shuffle, no one noticed Zara hovering in the security kiosk. Soon they had evacuated the corridor. Lagrange's sensor array—having detected no breach or fire—silenced the alarms. Zara's ears rang.

"It won't take long for the diagnostics team to find us," Prost said, eying the blackened panel above. "You won't be able to hide."

"Be quiet," Zara said, annoyed.

A squad of commandos emerged from an unseen bulkhead. One of them gave an order. The others protested. Zara tried to listen. "Dead? She killed him?" someone shouted. Malik popped out and issued an order, his baritone mumble inaudible. The cadre nodded then dispersed.

Zara ducked behind the vacant seat as they passed, her gun still awkwardly aimed at Prost. Eyes downcast, lips clenched, he remained quiet. She waited then peeked out. The corridor was empty.

Prost watched her as she slipped between the gravity chairs. "Be careful," he said, his brow wrinkled in worry.

"What's down there?"

"Something powerful, something extraordinary."

"What?"

"The anomaly."

Zara floated down the hallway. The hatch was sealed but unlocked. Hand over the latch's green glow, she hesitated. An umbilical transient shivered her spine. With a deep breath, she tapped the release.

No one noticed her at first. Malik and the techs were too busy. Through the glass opposite was the tempest recovery chamber, just like from before. The body of a commando bounced about inside, his bloody hair dabbing the aluminum walls like a paintbrush. Her feet anchored in medical hose, the man's killer—a woman—crouched with rifle aimed.

"We must follow certain laws," Malik spoke into the intercom's mic. "We violate them—if it's even possible to violate them—at our peril."

"Malik, behind you," someone said.

He turned around and let go of the microphone. "Turn it off!" he ordered a nearby technician. The glass dimmed, the window lattice cycling back to its one-way default. They could look out, but the woman with the rifle could not see in.

"No one panic," Malik gesticulated.

Too late. The technicians' eyes were wide like terrified animals. They acted as if Zara was nitroglycerine; just a bump, and boom! Confused, she peered through the glass at the woman on the other side.

"It's the other pilot..." Zara said. "Who is she?"

"Don't you recognize her?"

Zara squinted and floated closer. "It's... it's me, isn't it?"

"You arrived in Xanadu a month before Victoria's scheduled launch. The same time period –almost to the second– you spent on Xanadu," Malik explained. "That person in there is you, Zara, prior to launch."

Victoria's arrival and launch had been inelastic, causality delayed by an unexplained time shift. As a result, old Zara and new Zara existed in simultaneous space-time: Zara was the 'anomaly.'

"We've shielded you from her. Mixing simultaneous mass –hers and yours– could be catastrophic, $E=mc^2$, so much energy the event would be enough to destroy worlds. We risked total annihilation. We felt this elaborate containment was necessary. We couldn't know. As a precaution, we tried to isolate both of you... at least that was the idea."

The polished Victoria of Hangar Two was the weather-beaten Victoria of Hangar One, eons newer. Entombed and electromagnetically isolated, Titan's engineers had shielded it from this current iteration of the multiverse. The need to quarantine a rogue Xanduvian alien stowaway was just bullshit.

But with Zara, they'd gotten creative and attempted a switch, for whatever reason. Her Titan debrief was supposed to be her exit. The old Zara was supposed to be swapped for the new, leaving the new Zara to continue her flight.

"As an experiment, we tried mixing both your limbic streams digitally. I'm sure you remember. The resulting chaotic waveform proved inconclusive."

Zara recalled the coincident circuit and the fiber-optic node they'd attached to her spinal

jack. Afraid to mingle them both physically, Titan's engineers had mixed their thoughts instead.

"Why her? Why not me?"

"Causality needs to be maintained. We must launch her, not you. Not doing so could be catastrophic."

"Says who?"

"Says physics."

A thump on the glass. Inside the chamber, the new Zara had wrenched free a filtration pump and hurled it at the window, her muted scream barely audible. She aimed her laser rifle at a hostage cowering in the chamber. Malik, his brow beaded with sweat, ignored her threats.

"She's angry with us," Malik explained. "Your early arrival has forced us to keep her caged. But she's gotten impatient, understandably so. Perhaps you remember?"

Zara floated up to the glass, fingers touching the thermoplastic. Buried in the wreckage of her failed memory and mulched with the slipstream of drift-dive clutter, she didn't remember any of this. Was she that person, or someone else?

Part superstition, part science, Malik and his team were bumbling. To force causality in order to maintain the laws of nature was an act of worship, not precaution. If the universe allowed two Zaras, then no paradox truly existed. Insulating two simultaneous lifeforms served no other purpose than to 'knock on wood.'

"Let me speak to her." She reached for the microphone.

"No!"

"Why not?"

"Too dangerous."

"That isn't me, Malik. That is someone else."

"We don't know that."

Time always moved forward, never back. Synced to the ebb and flow of the universe, Zara was an echo. Malik knew better; time travel was impossible. This new universe, like the one which had given birth to her, was the same in a relative way, but not unique. Somewhere in the quark DNA of the Big Bang, the embryo of matter and energy split in duplicate, giving birth to a multiverse mimic.

"This has to end. You can't send her. You've got to stop this."

"That decision is non-negotiable."

"You're dooming me —us— to repeat this. You understand that? There is no fate here."

Locked in the loop like some inter-dimensional Sisyphus, the new Zara would again fly to Xanadu and return, giving birth to the events taking place now. The cycle could be broken; it had to be broken. Looking around the room, she noticed a rack of breathers, mask units tied to a small ten-minute tank of air. They'd deployed automatically with the alarm. Zara pulled one free, its attached tank solid and blunt.

"What are you doing?"

Zara smacked the window. The glass cracked in a web of spatial noise. The lattice faded transparent then exploded into a crystal cloud. The membrane was no more.

#

"God damn it, Malik!"

"Put it down, Zara," a hostage whimpered.

"You shut up!"

Jockeying the rifle into the crook of her elbow, she ripped the hoses from an IV pump. Tearing it

free, she threw the brick-sized object at the window. Bouncing off, the pump knocked into the body of the dead commando, spinning him like a rag-doll.

Too long. They were planning something. Shoving the rifle to her shoulder, Zara waited, the muzzle dangerously reflected back at herself. A minute passed then an explosion. Her image disappeared into shards as the window shattered.

Zara squeezed the trigger.

A cone of blue indigo sighted the target, the sizzling laser following in its wake. The shot was dead on. The woman screamed and grabbed her head, blood-wet and burnt black. The heat dissipated through her skull and brain, killing her. Dressed in a technician's jumpsuit, the petite infiltrator was hardly a commando. Linked by a common gravity, the dead woman joined the other corpse in a macabre zero-G dance.

Malik hovered in a cloud of shattered glass, mouth slack. Zara waited for somebody to say something, but no one did. The two techs, now free, clambered through the ruined window to escape.

"Who was that?"

"No one."

"Malik... who did I just kill?"

"Forget about it." Malik drifted in to meet her.

"Are you ready?"

"Ready?" Zara stammered. "Ready for what?"

"To fly the Victoria to Alpha Proxima."

"Are you kidding? Now?"

"Yes. Right now."

After her rampage, two people dead, it all made no sense. Desperate to escape, Zara played along. Malik offered amnesty; best not to question. Malik

floated in and offered his hand. Letting go of the rifle, she let him lead her out of the chamber, careful to avoid the floating dead girl.

"You're launching me?" Zara asked again, incredulous.

"Yes. The time is right."

Malik shuttled her into the corridor. Prost approached from the security kiosk at the end of the hall, guards in tow. Wheezing, he looked at Zara then Malik. His face was blank with shock. Malik offered a knowing glance.

"So you're sending her," Prost said at last, relighting a bent cigar. "What happened to the other..."

"—The loop's complete. Causality preserved." Malik winked.

"Dead?"

"Dead."

Too cryptic, they talked in code.

"Is Victoria's payload configured?"

"Finished this morning. We added two more megaton-caliber devices complete with fusion detonators. The guidance software was updated and loaded this morning. The rocket bombs are good to go. They should deploy on final deceleration somewhere outside L2 Lagrange," Prost explained.

"And do we have targets?"

"Far Side reconnaissance identified an abandoned unionist base occupied only up until a week ago, a strategic hub. It's well within the window."

"Perfect. Anything else?"

"Trade uploaded some intel to LISP yesterday." Prost accessed his hand console and thumbed through it. "There was a clandestine CGT meeting in the Cyprus Free Zone two weeks ago. Evidence of

the meeting only surfaced yesterday. Big fish, all of them, all major bosses and organizers."

"Quite the score."

"Well, Zara..." Prost flashed her a joker's smile. "I wish you only the best in your voyage." He offered a limp salute, then grabbed a handrail and slipped past.

"I don't think I'm ready, Malik. I need more training, shitloads of it. The implant could still be unstable. The Pilot hasn't been proven. It's too dangerous."

Malik expressed confidence. "You will return to us, unharmed, lieutenant. Your flight will be a complete success."

"How can you know?"

"I just do."